

## Thinking about the media: a review of theory and research on media perceptions, media effects perceptions, and their consequences

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## Thinking About the Media: A Review of Theory and Research on Media Perceptions, Media Effects Perceptions, and Their Consequences

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### Abstract

This review explicates the past, present and future of theory and research concerning audience perceptions of the media as well as the effects that perceptions of media have on audiences. Before the sections that examine media perceptions and media effects perceptions, we first identify various psychological concepts and processes involved in generating media-related perceptions. In the first section, we analyze two types of media perceptions: media trust/credibility perceptions and bias perceptions, focusing on research on the Hostile Media Perception. In both cases, we address the potential consequences of these perceptions. In the second section, we assess theory and research on perceptions of media effects (often referred to as Presumed Influence) and their consequences (referred to as the Influence of Presumed Influence). As examples of Presumed Influence, we evaluate the literature on the Persuasive Press Inference and the Third-Person Perception. The bodies of research on media perceptions and media effects perceptions have been featured prominently in the top journals of the field of mass communication over the past 20 years. Here we bring them together in one synthetic theoretical review.

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**Keywords:** Media Perceptions; Media Effects Perceptions; Media Trust; Media Credibility; Media Bias; Hostile Media Perception; Presumed Influence; Influence of Presumed Influence; Persuasive Press Inference; Third-person Perception

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### Highlights

- This article examines theory and research examining citizens' perceptions of media and perceptions of media effects.
- Four research areas are highlighted: media trust/credibility perceptions, Hostile Media Perceptions, Persuasive Press Inference, and Third-person Perceptions.
- The psychological processes that contribute to media perceptions include selective perception, assimilation and contrast, and confirmation and disconfirmation biases.
- Psychological processes involved in perceptions of media effects include selectivity, ego defensiveness/enhancement, negativity bias, optimistic bias, self-categorization, and stereotyping.
- Media trust and credibility are two interrelated media perceptions of crucial importance to media practitioners and media researchers.
- The Hostile Media Perception occurs when ideological predispositions lead individuals to perceive media bias against their own interests.
- The Persuasive Press Inference involves assumptions about media effects consistent with the perceived slant of media.
- Third-person Perceptions are when individuals see others as being more affected by harmful media content than they are themselves.
- This article examines theory and research on these perceptions, their antecedents and consequences, and offers suggestions for future research.

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The assertion that mass media play an important role in the everyday life of most people is beyond question. The growth of new forms of mass media (e.g., websites, blogs, news aggregators, social media), as well as new forms of message delivery (e.g., smartphones, laptops, tablets) amplify the presence of media in daily life. It is clear that not only do researchers recognize the potential effects of mass media, but members of the public do as well. In fact, references to the power of mass media are plentiful in both media and public discourse. Researchers and the public alike are interested in, and concerned about, the mass media as a potentially influential force in social and political life.

As such, it is not surprising that research on media effects has flourished in communication and related disciplines like psychology, sociology and political science. Not only have researchers studied the impact of mass media, but they have

also conducted research on the impact that perceptions of media effects have. Questions have been asked regarding how people perceive mass media, how powerful they believe media effects to be, and what the consequences of such perceptions are. Research on perceptions of media and media effects has been predominantly, though not exclusively, undertaken by American scholars using U.S. samples. Research in this area tends to draw from social-psychological theories and is methodologically quantitative, and the unit of analysis is typically done on a micro-level.

The research that we review in the area of media perception research, such as the Hostile Media and the Third-Person phenomena, have been extremely fruitful lines of communication research in the past several decades. However, despite their similar psychological underpinnings and the fact that they are to some degree consequentially related,

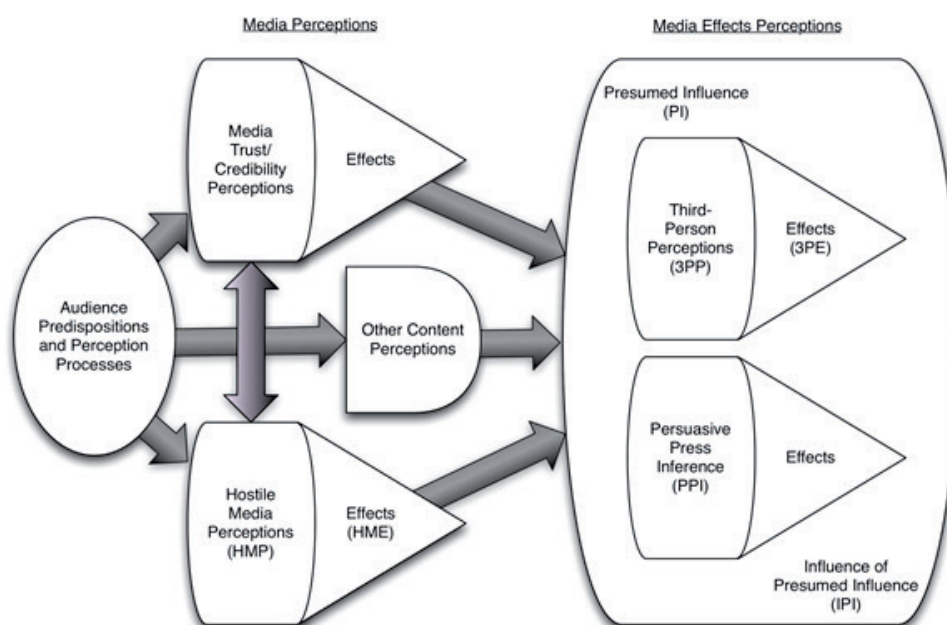
they are often studied in isolation from each other when in fact they may have reciprocal consequences for each other. For example, the perception that the media are hostile to one's interests may motivate greater concern about their potential effects on others, while concern for effects on others may also foster the perception that the media are hostile. Our comprehensive review seeks to enhance the theoretical integration of the various strands of research that examine perceptions of media and their effects by highlighting their psychological underpinnings and extending interrelationships. In the process, we identify areas where research can be expanded.

In this review, we address the current state of theory and research on media perceptions and perceptions of media effects (see Figure 1 for a visual overview of the scope of this review). We begin by examining the psychological concepts and processes involved in generating media perceptions. We then proceed to discuss the mass communication research that has explored various forms of media perceptions and their consequences. These perceptions include media trust and credibility, and a media bias perception known as the Hostile Media Perception. We then move on to address research that deals with perceptions of media effects and their consequences, including the Persuasive Press Inference and the Third-person Perception.

## Media Perception Concepts and Processes

Before we discuss research and theory on media perceptions, it is important to address some of the basic psychological concepts and processes involved in developing media perceptions. Perception is a central concept of social research, as theorists have long recognized that "reality" is in the mind of the observer. That is, it is important to understand how individuals perceive the world, as conditioned by their past experiences and predispositions, including potential patterns, stereotypes, biases, and distortions in those perceptions. The focus of the research reviewed in this article is on the nature of people's perceptions of the media, and the effects that result from exposure to media content. Because this research focuses on perceptions, it is also concerned with the various factors that shape these perceptions. In terms of the nature of the perceived effects being examined, this research has included effects on knowledge, attitudes and behaviors, and has been extended to the perceived effects of both news and entertainment media.

The most basic concept involved in media perception research is in fact, "the media." The term, "the media" seemingly comes up as frequently in public and media discourse as it does in the conversations of experts who study the media. Notably, members of the public, politicians, journalists,



**Figure 1.** Media Perceptions and Media Effects Perceptions. (Back to [pg. 55](#), [pg. 68](#), [pg. 70](#))



and even media researchers often make the mistake of using media as a singular noun, as witnessed by the common use of the phrase, “The media is...” This phrase reflects a tendency by all of these groups to lump the multi-faceted monstrosity that constitutes the media into a monolithic entity. When citizens use the terms, the “liberal” media or the “conservative” media, they are making generalizations that do not apply to all or even most media. Similarly, when individuals make claims about how violent, sexist, or racist the media are, they are making stereotyped judgments that do not apply equally to all media, much less to all journalists. But people make stereotyped judgments about collectives (e.g., groups organizations or people) all the time. Walter Lippmann famously recognized that it is a common and natural occurrence to see the world through simplified stereotypes that have heuristic value in everyday life, but provide only partial understandings of reality (Lippmann, 1922). Such is the case when we use the term, “the media,” whether we are citizens, politicians, journalists, or media researchers.

As media researchers, we often recognize that when citizens, politicians or journalists refer to “the media,” they are making generalizations that gloss over a lot of important distinctions and differences between media. However, as media researchers, we frequently pose questions to the subjects we study that require respondents to make generalizations based on stereotyped perceptions of a monolithic media. Whether in the realm of public discourse, or in the realm of media research, it is important to recognize that the media are not monolithic. They differ in important ways. First, there are obvious differences between media based on the functions they serve such as news and entertainment. And while many individuals have rightly observed that the boundaries between news and information have increasingly blurred into “infotainment,” there is considerable variance in media messages and effects across broad content domains. Moreover, there are significant differences within those content domains. There are also meaningful differences by medium, as reflected in the differences in the nature of content among movies, books, television, radio, newspapers, and so forth. And again, though some of the media may be exhibiting characteristics of media convergence, their differences remain stark. Moreover, new media (e.g., the Internet, social media, blogs, mobile apps, etc.) have added to the variegation of media forms. Even within specific types of media such as newspapers or television, there are often numerous notable

differences between local, national, and international media organizations. And within those categories, significant differences can be observed (e.g., *The New York Times* versus *The Wall Street Journal*, or *MSNBC* versus *Fox News*). At a closer level, newspapers stories differ from each other markedly, just as television shows or movies differ from each other. Thus, when people make statements about the media, or when researchers ask them to render an opinion regarding the media, gross generalizations are being made that do not apply equally well to the various corners of the media monolith.

The above paragraph identifies a distinction that is particularly important for communication researchers studying media perceptions and perceptions of media effects: the notion that there are different levels of media involved (i.e., media as a whole, mediums such as newspaper and television, media organizations, types of media content such as news, genre within content type, and particular media messages). In our examination of the research on media and effects perceptions, we found that across the literature, studies differed in terms of the level on which they focus. Two points can be made here. First, it is important to keep this distinction between different media levels in mind when surveying the literature. Second, future research may want to explore how media perceptions and perceived effects are influenced by the nature of the media level in question.

Given all of the differences that exist within the media, it is not surprising that individuals view media very differently, with fairly obvious differences in judgments attributable to factors like political ideology, social class, race, and gender. However, individuals may differ when observed at different points in time depending on factors like recent exposure to a particular medium or being primed to think about a particular subset of media. Moreover, differences in media diets may lead individuals to differ in their perceptions of media. For example, heavy users of television news may see the media very differently than heavy newspaper readers. There is ample evidence to show that people are very selective in the media that they choose to use. There is some evidence that individual differences in media use lead individuals to develop different perceptions of the media based on a different set of media experiences (Oh, Park, & Wanta, 2011). Also, individual selectivity in terms of exposure and attention in accordance with different predispositions and gratifications sought introduce further variance in media perceptions (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Ponder & Haridakis, 2015; Stroud,

2008, Stroud 2010).

However, it is not just differences in media experiences that lead to variation in media perceptions. Researchers have also identified various psychological processes that introduce biases into the development of media perceptions. One major source of variation is selective perception, a form of perception bias in which individuals' predispositions influence the way that they see the world. Research on selective perception has shown it to be robust and powerful form of biased perceptions that applies to a wide range of perceptual phenomena, including perceptions of media and media content. In a classic study of selective perception, Hastorf and Cantril (1954) distributed a questionnaire to students at Dartmouth and Princeton to assess their perceptions of a game that was played between the football teams of the two schools in 1951. Not surprisingly, the respondents saw the game very differently in terms of which team was responsible for what both sides saw as a rough and dirty game. Princeton students put the blame on Dartmouth and vice versa. Moreover, when students from both schools were asked to watch a movie of the game and identify infractions, Princeton students reported many more infractions by the Dartmouth team and saw those infractions as being more flagrant. The Dartmouth students who watched the same game film saw it very differently in light of their allegiance to Dartmouth. While selective perception has been widely recognized by media researchers, its most directly relevant application to perceptions of the media has been in the area of the Hostile Media Perceptions, discussed below.

Social Judgment Theory (Hovland & Sherif, 1980) suggests another potential source of perceptual bias relevant to media perceptions. This theory maintains that individual perceptions are developed in the context of attitudinal predispositions. When individuals are called upon to render a judgment about a construct (i.e., a judgment target such as an object or idea; in the case of media perceptions, the judgment target might be the media, a news organization, a journalist, or a news story), they assess the target relative to the structure of their existing relevant attitudes. Social Judgment Theory proposes that the structure of relevant attitudes constitute three potential zones in which the judgment object may be placed: the "latitude of acceptance" (a range of acceptable ideas), the "latitude of rejection" (a range of unacceptable ideas), and the "latitude of non-commitment" (a range that represents ideas that are neither acceptable or unacceptable). When individuals make judgments, percep-

tions of those targets may become distorted. When a target falls within their latitude of acceptance, there is a tendency to see the target as more similar than it really is (assimilation), and when the target falls into the latitude of rejection, the target is often perceived as more different than it really is (contrast). By applying Social Judgment Theory to media perceptions, we might expect assimilation and contrast effects. For instance, when it comes to judging a conservative news organization like Fox News, conservatives may experience assimilation and perceive the network and its news stories as being more similar to their ideology than they really are. Similarly, liberals may be subject to contrast effects and see Fox News as being more consistently conservative than it really is. Sherif and Sherif (1967) also note that individuals who are very ego-involved for the issue in question tend to have a smaller latitude of acceptance. For media perceptions, this might mean that ego-involved people judge media organizations and news stories as being more different from their own preferences than they really are.

Another process related to media perceptions is the "confirmation bias," in which individuals engage in processes to seek, perceive, and recall information in a way that supports their predispositions (Plous, 1993). Such a phenomenon might help explain the persistence of false beliefs such as the common tendency among staunch conservatives to believe that President Obama is a Muslim and was born outside the United States. Such confirmation biases may cause people to use media that are likely to support their viewpoints, and even to construct memories of mediated reports that confirm their viewpoints, such as when 2016 Republican presidential primary candidates Donald Trump and Ben Carson claimed to have seen media reports of Muslims in New Jersey celebrating the 9/11 terrorist attacks, despite the fact that media have not been able to confirm that such videos actually exist.

A "disconfirmation bias" may also affect how media reports are perceived. Disconfirmation bias is when people resist or discount information that conflicts with their predispositions, such as when individuals deny overwhelming evidence of global warming. Lord, Ross, and Lepper (1979) observed confirmation and disconfirmation biases when they presented pro- and anti-death penalty respondents with two conflicting studies on the deterrence effects of capital punishment. The respondents rated studies that had findings consistent with their viewpoint as being more valid and convincing than studies that were counter to their viewpoint. When applied to media perceptions, confirmation and

disconfirmation biases are similar to selective perception. They all affect how people perceive media, leading them to seek, interpret, and remember information that confirms their beliefs about the media, and to avoid, attack, and forget that which conflicts with their orientation toward the media, whether those orientations pertain to individual journalists, news stories, media organizations, or media as a whole.

Selective perception, contrast, and disconfirmation processes may work together to, not only bias media perceptions (i.e., distorting perceptions of the media organizations and the content they produce), but also to produce perceptions that the media are biased (i.e., contributing to more long-term, resilient and global perceptions regarding the media monolith). Conservatives tend to see the media as having a liberal bias, while liberals are likely to see the media as having a conservative bias. These perceptions have become reified through continued references and use in the culture. For instance, we hear terms like the “liberal media” and the “lamestream media” repeated so often that they become culturally accepted as true, particularly to those for whom such labels are a match with their predispositions. To the extent that these constructs become reified, it is not just the predispositions of individuals that color media perceptions (through selectivity and contrast processes), it is the existence of the reified constructs themselves that shape subsequent perceptions and judgments. With these basic principles in mind, we now turn to a discussion of specific theory and research that deals with media perceptions and their subsequent effects.

### Media Perceptions and Effects of Media Perceptions

In this section, we review media perceptions and their consequences, including media trust and credibility perceptions (grouped together because research has shown them to be highly intertwined), and media bias perceptions as exemplified by research on the Hostile Media Perception.

### Media Trust and Credibility Perceptions and Effects.

A troubling trend for news media scholars and practitioners has been an increasingly negative attitude toward the

press among the American public since the mid-to-late 1900s (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Ladd, 2011). For example, the General Social Survey found in 1973 that just 14.4% of respondents had “hardly any” confidence in the press, while 22.7% had a “great deal” of confidence. By 2012, 46% reported hardly any confidence and just 8.8% reported a great deal of confidence (Smith & Son, 2013). Gallup periodically asks American citizens how much trust and confidence they have that the news media report “the news fully, accurately, and fairly.” In 1972, 18% reported a “great deal” of trust and confidence and 50% a fair amount. In 2014, the findings were 10% and 30%, respectively. In 1972, a scant 6% reported they had no trust or confidence at all, while in 2014 that figure rose to a high of 24%. The press fares poorly among the public in European countries as well, with one analysis showing that citizens in Great Britain, France, Germany and Spain expressed less confidence in the news media in 1987 than did Americans (Parisot, 1988), while those in China show higher levels of media trust (Liu & Bates, 2009).

Highlighting the importance of this area of study, a Web of Science search presented in Table 1 revealed there were at least 95 peer-reviewed journal articles published regarding news media trust or credibility since 1990, with interest growing in more recent years. While a good portion of the research focuses on U.S. media, research in international contexts is robust and becoming increasingly common.

### Factors shaping perceptions of media trustworthiness and credibility.

Certainly, some of the blame for the increasingly negative perceptions may lie at the feet of the news media themselves. Reports of plagiarism, fabrication, and embellishment by award-winning journalists like Jayson Blair, Stephen Glass, Jonah Lehrer, and Brian Williams that escaped fact-checkers; networks relying on faulty exit-polling data to miscall the 2000 U.S. presidential election; and the recent phone-hacking scandal involving British tabloids (see Bucy, D’Angelo, & Bauer, 2014) are but a few examples in which news media clearly fell short of the public’s expectations. Outside of these egregious failings, however, are relatively commonplace and accepted journalistic practices that contribute to distrust in the press, including the use of anonymous sources (Pjesivac & Rui, 2014) and “game framing,” in which political issues are treated as strategic contests (Hopmann, Shehata, & Stromback, 2015; see Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).



**Table 1.** *Number of research articles by year (Web of Science).*

Year	Media Trust and Credibility	Hostile Media Perception and Effects	Persuasive Press Inference	Third-person Perception and Effects
1992				2
1993	3			2
1994				1
1995				6
1996				7
1997	1			5
1998	1		1	6
1999	1		1	9
2000	2			6
2001	1	2	2	7
2002		3	2	5
2003	3	3	1	5
2004	3	2		7
2005	3	2	1	10
2006	6	2		6
2007	6	4	1	14
2008	3	4	1	29
2009	7	2	1	9
2010	7	2		9
2011	8	7		12
2012	13	5		9
2013	7	3		10
2014	12	5		12
2015	8	8	1	13
TOTAL	95	57	13	200

[1] The publication trend data displayed in Table 1 were collected using the Web of Science database using the all databases option. Results were constrained to the period from 1990 through 2015. Searches were conducted for the following four areas: Media Trust and Credibility (search: “media trust,” and “media credibility”), Hostile Media Perception and Effects (search: “hostile media perception”), Third-Person Perceptions and Effects (search: “third-person perception”), and Persuasive Press Inference (search: “persuasive press inference”). (Back to [pg. 46](#), [pg. 54](#), [pg. 59](#), [pg. 70](#))

Additionally, negative political coverage can lead to distrust of news media (Sabato, 1993; Fallows, 1996). Experimental research has shown that even a host's tone can impact credibility judgments, with hosts taking a more serious, civil tone, seen as more credible than those with a combative or humorous tone (Vraga, Edgerly, Bode, Carr, Bard, Johnson, & Shah,

2012). Through interviews with survivors of Hurricane Katrina, research by Voorhees, Vick, and Perkins (2007) found that some interviewees thought that news accounts were exaggerated, overly negative, inaccurate or did not match their own experiences or the experiences of their acquaintances.

But other factors beyond the control of individual reporters and media organizations can also shape perceptions of news media trustworthiness and credibility. In Ladd's (2011) examination of the U.S. news media, he found trust was highest during the 1950s through 1970s, a time of low economic competition among news outlets that allowed journalists to pursue serious investigative journalism. When economic competition increased, Ladd (2011) notes there was an increased focus on soft news to draw audiences from entertainment and alternative media, with the resulting decline in quality journalism leading the public to hold the profession in lower esteem. Additionally, Ladd (2011) found that ratings of news media decline during times of increased political polarization, when elite criticism of mainstream news media is more commonplace. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) have found indirect evidence that elite criticism of mainstream media in conservative political talk programming may lead to increased distrust among its audiences. Moreover, national political structure can interact with private versus state media ownership to affect judgments of news media credibility, with those in non-democratic societies trusting state-owned television media the least (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). However, research in China found official state media to be perceived as highly credible (Zhang, Zhou, & Shen, 2014).

A bevy of individual-level factors are also related to perceptions of news media trust and credibility. Older people (Bucy, 2003), men (Johnson & Kaye, 2009; Choi, Watt, & Lynch, 2006), the more educated (Mulder, 1981), and those with conservative ideology and Republican Party identification, particularly those who listen to talk radio (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Jones 2004), tend to have less trust or confidence in news media. Those with high levels of interpersonal trust and the politically interested tend to have more trust in news media (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Media skepticism can interact with political cynicism to lead people to view alternatives to mainstream news, such as citizen journalism, to be more credible (Carr, Barnidge, Lee, & Tsang 2014). Choi, Watt, and Lynch (2006) also found partisan differences in the perceived credibility of Internet news sources during the Iraq War. Results revealed partisan differences in perceived credibility of television news, with critics of the war seeing news as being less credible than supporters. Race and ethnicity can also affect trust in media. Shim, Golan, Day, and Yang (2015) found that ethnic minorities in Pakistan perceived local television to be less credible than did the Punjabi major-

ity, while ethnic minorities found international news media to be more credible. Beaudoin and Thorson (2005) observed that African-Americans perceived news coverage of African-Americans as less credible than news coverage of other groups. There is also evidence that increased religiosity--depending on how it is measured--is associated with perceiving newspaper and television news media as less trustworthy or credible (Golan & Day, 2010).

It is important to note that the findings above relate largely to the mainstream news media monolith. Perceptions of news media credibility and trustworthiness can vary greatly by type of medium and the specific outlets being rated. For example, Americans express more confidence in local newspapers and television than "the press" in general, and declines in confidence ratings have been much less steep in the former than the latter (Gronke & Cook, 2007). In a study of Chinese media, television was also found to be the most credible (Zhang, Zhou, & Shen, 2014). There have also been differences observed with respect to the trustworthiness of media outlets when they are online versus their original medium. For example, politically interested Internet users during the 1996 presidential campaign rated the online version of newspapers higher than the print version, but did not rate the online versions of newsmagazines higher than the print version (Johnson & Kaye, 1998). In a follow-up study, Johnson and Kaye (2010) found a different pattern of credibility ratings among politically interested respondents for online and traditional sources during the 2004 election. Online television news sources were viewed as more credible, while online radio news sources and online news magazines were viewed as less credible. There was no difference in credibility perceptions found in 2004 between online and printed newspapers.

When specific sources are considered, trust varies widely. In a Pew Research Center study, Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, and Matsa (2014) found *The Economist*, the BBC, NPR, PBS, *The Wall Street Journal* and the major U.S. television news networks to be among the most trusted sources among Americans; while BuzzFeed, The Rush Limbaugh Show, The Glenn Beck Program, The Ed Schultz Show, Al Jazeera America, The Sean Hannity Show, and Daily Kos to be the least trusted. When broken down by respondents' political ideology, conservatives were different from liberals such that all of those in the above list of trusted news sources, except for the *Wall Street Journal*, were *distrusted* by those categorized as consistent conservatives, while the same group expressed trust in conservative-leaning outlets like FOX News, The

Blaze, Breitbart, and programs with conservative hosts. Those categorized as consistent liberals, on the other hand, tended to trust more than they distrusted all media sources they were asked about, save for sources with conservative leanings.

### Consequences of media trust and credibility perceptions.

Perceptions of news media trust and credibility can play a role in attenuating or amplifying media effects. Tsftati (2003a) found those low in media trust are less likely to agree with the climate of public opinion presented in news coverage, which he suggested could have implications for media effects such as the spiral of silence that rely on people's perceptions of what others think. News media trust moderates agenda-setting effects, with those higher in media trust more likely to share issue priorities that align with the media agenda (Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Tsftati, 2003b). Experimental research has also shown media priming effects to be amplified by media trust, with those high in media trust most likely to apply criteria made salient in media coverage in their judgment of attitude objects (Miller & Krosnick, 2000). Media trust can also affect the extent to which people learn from the news (Ladd, 2011).

There is some concern that distrust of news media could drive people to tune out. Indeed, Tsftati and Cappella (2003) found that those skeptical of mainstream news media tend to gravitate more heavily to Internet sources and political talk radio. They note, however, the association between trust and exposure is modest, and "even the most skeptical audience members watch the national and local news on television and read the daily newspaper" (p. 518), and skeptics tend to consume more mainstream media than they do alternatives. There is some evidence that attention paid to different forms of news media can vary in distinct ways depending on the locus of trust. For example, Williams (2012) found that increased trust in those delivering the news, such as reporters, was related to increased newspaper attention, while increased trust in news organizations was related only to increased television news attention. Williams' findings illustrate the value in taking a more fine-grained approach to examining the relationship between different forms of media trust and attention to news media.

The public's trust in news media and perceptions about their credibility could also affect the ability of news organi-

zations and reporters to do their jobs. Bucy, D'Angelo, and Bauer (2014) suggest public distrust in news media could disrupt the power balance between the media and other powerful institutions, and put the media under more scrutiny, leading the press to be less aggressive in its coverage. While Americans support the watchdog role of journalism, news media distrust could lead people to believe the press has too much freedom and that they abuse the freedoms they have (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). Consequently, citizens may increasingly support government regulation of the press, such as licensing for reporters, fines for inaccuracy or bias, and requirements for balanced reporting (Smith & Lichter, 1997).

Of concern to many scholars is the tendency for those low in media trust to also be less trusting of government. Trust in the press and in government institutions in America have both seen similar declines over the decades, leading some to question whether the drop in both is a symptom of a more general dissatisfaction with socio-political institutions or whether there is a causal link between the two. An analysis by Gronke and Cook (2007) of General Social Survey data from 1973 through 2004, however, found that strong partisans, those whose party was in power, the more religious, and those with rising incomes are skeptical of the press while more supportive of other American institutions. This finding led the authors to suggest there are distinct factors at play in shaping perceptions of each. Gronke and Cook (2007) furthermore note that perceptions of media credibility follow a pattern observed when the American public is quizzed about its attitudes toward Congress. Just as people disdain Congress as an institution, they generally view the representatives from their districts in a positive light. Similarly, when it comes to perceptions of the news media, people give the press in general low marks, while expressing satisfaction about the media they use often. This bifurcation raises methodological concerns in studies of media trust that we will address later in this article.

### Future directions for media trust and credibility research.

As shown above, studies have examined attitudes about the news media or the press in general, have focused on comparisons between different media types, and have included more granular examinations of individual media outlets and journalists. There is certainly a case to be made

for different approaches to meet the needs of any given study. However, scholars must consider the limitations of each approach and design survey instruments accordingly. In an era in which news media choices are greatly expanded, it is unknown what a given respondent considers the news media, the press, the mainstream new media or even newspapers, television, radio, or the Internet to actually be. When people are asked questions about trust and credibility, what constitutes the media that they use as the basis for judgment? Are the attitudes expressed related to the media they prefer to consume or related to those which they do not? Do the attitudes reflect a judgment about a specific outlet or journalist they have recently been exposed to, or a lifetime of experience consuming media? Are the attitudes respondents express related to the news they are exposed to directly or those which they have been told about by others? Do the attitudes relate to global, national, or local news media? Are judgments related to those delivering straight news content, or are opinion sources also included? Survey questions, therefore, should be designed in such a way to reduce uncertainty as to what individuals being surveyed are responding.

The astute reader will note that in our discussion of news media trust and credibility we have yet to explicitly define these terms. The reason is straightforward—there exists no universally agreed upon definitions or measures for these concepts, and they have often been referred to interchangeably in the research (Hellmueller & Trilling, 2012). A comprehensive review of the various definitions and measures used by scholars, research organizations, and media firms is beyond the scope of this article, but we will highlight some examples to demonstrate the need for further development in this area.

In their influential work on news media credibility the 1950s, Carl Hovland and the Yale Communication Research Group defined credibility as expertise and trustworthiness. In later research, Gaziano and McGrath (1986) conducted a factor analysis of survey responses collected as part of an American Society of Newspaper Editors study and found answers to 12 of 16 questions about perceptions of media performance grouped together to form a credibility factor. These questions concerned fairness, bias, completeness, accuracy, respect for privacy, watching out for the audience's interests, concern about community wellbeing, whether the news is factual or opinionated, whether fact and opinion are separated, trustworthiness, concern with public interest over profits, and whether reporters were trained well. Three oth-

er items, including caring about what the audience thinks, sensationalism, and morality, grouped together to form a social concerns factor. The Gaziano and McGrath (1986) index underwent further refinement through the work of Meyer (1988), who raised questions about the face validity of some of the items in the index as well as a lack of an explicit connection to prior theory. Meyer's (1988) work resulted in a 5-item "believability" index, that asks whether respondents believe the press is "fair," "unbiased," tells the "whole story," is "accurate," and "can be trusted"; and a 4-item "affiliation" index that asks whether the press "watches out after your interests," is "concerned about the community's well-being," is "patriotic," and is "concerned mainly about the public interest" (pp. 573-574). While these measures certainly represent an improvement over single-item measures, such as confidence in the press, they still have received criticism for not being linked to higher-level theory.

In the indexes above, trustworthiness is intertwined with credibility, with credibility being treated as the higher-order concept. Other work, however, has taken an approach in which trust is the higher-order concept--of which credibility is a component--and have linked media trust to sociological theories on interpersonal and institutional trust (Tsftati & Cappella, 2003; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Williams, 2012). Using data collected in Germany, Kohring and Matthes (2007) found media trust to be a multidimensional construct composed of an individual's trust in the news media's "selectivity of topics," "selectivity of facts," "accuracy of depictions," and "journalistic assessment." The connection to a broader theory of trust is certainly an advancement that could help situate findings regarding perceptions of media within sociological theory, but more work must be done to validate the Kohring and Matthes (2007) measurement instrument in contexts outside of Germany. At the present, media credibility work appears dominant in the U.S, while scholarship examining media trust is more evident in work by scholars outside the U.S. (Hellmueller, 2012). The ability for scholars to confidently draw on both traditions to make observations and inferences related to perceptions of media performance would be greatly enhanced by work to both distinguish and unify these approaches.

Moreover, while the factor-analytic approach to uncovering the components of news media credibility or trust has increased understanding of these concepts, scholars would do well to heed the concern raised by Cronkhite and Liska (1976) that dimensions underlying ratings may be affected



by-- among other factors--time, topic, and context. It is, therefore, imperative for those developing indices to test them across a variety of contexts and topics, and perhaps develop custom indices sensitive to them.

## Hostile Media Perceptions and Effects.

Media bias is a perception that is related to perceptions of news media trust and credibility. Individuals who are low in perceived media trust and credibility are more likely to perceive the media as being biased. Similarly, individuals who perceive the news media to be biased are likely to question the credibility of the media as well as express media distrust. Such relationships are likely to be observed for perceptions of the media generally, as well as for specific news organizations and individual journalists. However, because research on bias perceptions, frequently conducted under the rubric of the Hostile Media Perception, has been more conceptually distinct, we review that research separately from trust and credibility perceptions.

As public concerns about news media bias have been around for a long time, so too have researchers been interested in studying media bias. For many decades, researchers were concerned with revealing patterns of bias in media content. This task has proven to be notoriously difficult as it is virtually impossible to objectively define what reality is, and thus impossible to define what an objective representation of reality is. Journalists themselves struggle with how to eliminate bias in news coverage. Objectivity in news, as in reality, has been shown to be socially constructed (Tuchman, 1980). Journalists have long wrestled with defining objectivity in trying to cover the “reality” of real-world events and issues. Instead, they have adopted rituals (Tuchman, 1978) like news formats and the reliance on official sources. They frequently cover stories by attempting to balance contending perspectives in the practice of “this side said/that side said” journalism while abdicating much of the responsibility of declaring which side’s arguments carry more weight (Pingree, Brossard, & McLeod, 2014).

Given that journalists have largely sidestepped the issue of defining bias by creating objectivity rituals, it is not surprising that media researchers have also struggled with news media bias. Social scientific approaches to the study of media bias have had a hard time establishing what an objective news story is and therefore have a hard time isolating

and measuring media bias. Researchers who have explored bias in news have typically measured the fairness and balance of articles by looking at the attention and prominence given to positions on either side of an issue (Fico & Freedman, 2008). More recently, researchers have turned their attention to examining audience perception of media bias, which largely sidesteps the problem of defining and measuring content bias. Nevertheless, research on media perceptions has expanded over the past three decades.

Studies of the Hostile Media Perception (HMP) have been the most visible body of research examining news media bias perceptions. Our analysis of the literature on the HMP shows that articles on the HMP (see [Table 1](#)) have been increasing in frequency since 2000. This research is grounded in the long-standing literature on selective perception.

Following the tradition of Hastorf and Cantril’s (1954) research on distorted perceptions of the Princeton/Dartmouth football game, Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) applied the selective perception logic to examine perceptions of news coverage of political issues. Similar to the way the college partisans saw a different reality when watching a football game, these researchers posited a “Hostile Media Effect” (HME) in which political partisans see news coverage differently from one another. The authors reported on the results of two studies conducted in very different contexts. First, their telephone survey conducted three days before the 1980 presidential election showed differences in judgments of news coverage between the supporters of Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter when asked about the bias of news media in general. Results, which are none too surprisingly in today’s relatively charged partisan environment, showed that 90% of the people who thought that media coverage had been biased believed that it was biased against their own candidate. However, such partisan differences were diminished when respondents were asked about their perception of bias in specific newspaper and magazine articles.

Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) also reported results of another study of pro-Arab and pro-Israeli students, which found that both groups perceived television news coverage as being biased in favor of the other side in coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict. These two studies support the notion that media perceptions, operating through the processes of selective perception and contrast processes, follow the hostile media pattern in which individuals view media content as being hostile to their own viewpoint. In the case of the media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict, non-partisan students



saw the coverage as being relatively neutral. The upshot of the HMP is that partisans see mainstream news media as biased, not only as biased against their viewpoint, but biased, period. It explains why American conservatives are so passionate in their indictment of the liberal media, while at the same time, liberals, perhaps less vocally, see the mainstream media as having a conservative bias.

Perloff (2015) notes that the results of the Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) study ran counter to the research at the time, which focused on selective perception that led to the assimilation of information, such as Lord, Ross, and Lepper's (1979) study that showed individuals interpreted research on capital punishment as supporting their own position. However, there is a key difference between this research and the HMP research, which exhibits a contrast effect of selective perception. That is, in the assimilation research, respondents were engaging in selective perception of reality as they interpreted the findings of research studies, whereas in studies of the HMP, respondents are responding to what they see as journalists' distorted representations of reality. Thus, we might reconcile the two studies by Lepper and his colleagues in several ways. First, assimilation effects may occur when we process research findings and contrast effects may occur for perceptions of the story as a whole, especially if we see the former as reality and the latter as an interpretation of reality (recognizing the limits of journalistic objectivity). Second, from the perspective of Social Judgment Theory, we may have a wider latitude of acceptance for research reports leading to assimilation effects and a wider latitude for rejection for news stories leading to contrast effects. Finally, contrast judgments appear when individuals judge messages perceived as reaching beyond themselves. News stories may cue thoughts of how a message may impact vulnerable others in the audience, triggering a defensive processing strategy (Gunther, Miller, & Liebhart, 2009).

Since the Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) study, the HMP has been replicated by a host of other studies. For example, Perloff (1989) and Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1993) found supportive evidence in a similar content context--Middle East conflict. Subsequent research has extended the HMP to other news coverage contexts such as presidential elections (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998), primate research (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001), physician-assisted suicide (Gunther & Christen, 2002), labor strikes (Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002), sports reporting (Arpan & Raney, 2003), genetically modified foods (Gunther &

Schmitt, 2004), Israeli settlements in Gaza (Tsftati & Cohen, 2005b), climate change (Kim, 2011), immigration (Watson & Riffe, 2013), same-sex marriage (Kim, 2015), and many others.

Most often, these studies ask respondents to react to news coverage that is more or less neutral. However, studies that use articles that are biased in a particular direction find a similar pattern of differences in perceptions between partisan groups, only the perceptions of both groups move in the direction of the bias, a shift that reflects what has been called a "relative" HMP (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001). The notion of the relative HMP would explain why strong conservative partisans might admit that Rush Limbaugh has a conservative bent, but would see him as being relatively fair and balanced in comparison to liberal partisans.

Perloff (2015) discusses the nature of the linkage between partisanship and the HMP, identifying three theoretical explanations: social identification, involvement and the influence of pre-existing values, favoring the latter as his preferred explanation. He argues that, not only is this a more parsimonious explanation, it also links to Social Judgment Theory through the contrast effect that results from information that falls within the latitude of rejection of political partisans.

Researchers have suggested a number of different mediating processes that might account for the HMP. Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart (2004) identified that differences in news media perceptions might be accounted for by differences in the way partisans selectively recall information, differences in their content judgments, and differences in their evaluation standards. They compared these competing explanations in research conducted in the context of the controversy over genetically modified foods. The results indicated that partisans from each side were making different judgments regarding the same content. Perloff (2015) notes an additional mediating factor--prior beliefs about news media bias that may come into play when individuals are asked to make judgments about media bias. To be sure, there are popular views regarding news bias on both sides of the political spectrum. The term "liberal media" is quite popular among conservatives. Similarly, liberals contend that the media inherently support conservative interests of corporations. This explanation holds that HMP occurs as a result of the tendency for partisans to be more likely to employ these pervasive social constructs in their judgments.

### Perception moderators.

Most studies of the HMP include a predispositional variable that either produces or moderates the size of the HMP. As noted above, many studies have shown that partisanship is a key variable that accounts for differences in news media bias. Many of the studies that focus on partisanship as the driving force behind HMPs assume that the high level of issue involvement among strong partisans provides the impetus that accounts for their divergent perceptions. But as Perloff (2015) points out, confounding partisanship and involvement may obscure researchers' ability to perceive a more nuanced understanding of the HMP. An individual's position on the political ideology continuum may set the conditions for the HMP and relative HMP. However, involvement may serve as a moderator in accentuating such perceptions. In the context of political elections, campaign involvement has been shown to be a strong predictor of the HMP, but the perception seems to be stronger for Republicans than for Democrats (Oh, Park, & Wanta, 2011). Again, this does not necessarily indicate that the news media are more critical of conservative viewpoints, but rather, it reflects the pervasive political trope of the "liberal media" that has been such a consistent mantra of conservative candidates, pundits and conservative journalists, that it has become widely accepted as fact.

A meta-analysis of 34 HMP studies by Hansen and Kim (2011) confirms the importance of involvement. Matthes (2013) examined the role of involvement more closely by differentiating between cognitive and affective involvement. They concluded that both types of involvement make independent contributions that help to account for partisan differences in perceived news media bias. In another study, Choi, Yang, and Chang (2009) observed that "value-relevant" involvement (i.e., preferences related to personal values) was a stronger predictor of the HMP than "outcome-relevant" involvement (i.e., preferences related to current goals). Arpan and Nabi (2011) showed that anger as an emotional reaction to media content accentuates bias judgments.

The fact that involvement has been shown to be related to the HMP would seem to contradict expectations from the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). These models propose that high-involvement individuals are highly motivated to process information more systematically by examining information that is "central" to the mes-

sage content. By contrast, low-involvement individuals make judgments based on heuristic shortcuts using peripheral cues. The findings of HMP research violate this expectation in two respects. First, high-involvement partisans perceive relatively neutral messages as being biased indicating that they are engaging in less systematic processing. Second, the fact that high-involvement partisans are more influenced by partisan cues reflects the influence of simpler, heuristic judgments. As such, there seems to be a disconnect between ELM/HSM theories and the findings of HMP research.

Other studies have broadened the scope of the hostile media phenomenon. For example, Richardson, Huddy, and Morgan (2008) demonstrated that the HMP extends beyond perceptions of news stories and news organizations to the perception of journalists who moderate political debates. Choi, Watt, and Lynch's (2006) study of media perceptions of news coverage of the Iraq War found that partisans' HMPs regarding news media bias extend to include perceptions of media credibility.

Gunther and Schmitt (2004) note that HMPs are inconsistent with biased assimilation--the tendency for people to perceive information as being more consistent with their viewpoints than it really is. In examining the results of Lord, Ross, and Lepper (1979), they suggest a key moderator of whether audiences will express a hostile media response (a phenomenon similar to a contrast effect) or an assimilation effect--is the perceived reach of the message (i.e., its potential audience size). Messages that are expected to have little reach (e.g., an academic journal) will produce an assimilation effect, whereas messages that are perceived to have a large reach (e.g., TV news broadcasts) will elicit a HMP. In making this case, they invoke a Third-person Perception explanation. Response to a low-reach medium invokes an imagined audience that is largely constituted by the self and therefore is more naturally assimilated. On the other hand, the large-reach medium is seen as reaching a large number of other people, who (consistent with the Third-person Perception) are likely to be more easily affected by the undesirable content, thus generating more concern about hostile media. The researchers demonstrate support for their contention with their experiment, which demonstrated that participants assimilated a message when it took the form of an essay, and contrasted it when it was presented in the form of a news report. Other studies have corroborated this finding (Christen & Huberty, 2007; Gunther, Edgerly, Akin, & Broesch, 2012; Gunther & Liebhart, 2006; Gunther, Miller, &

Liebhart, 2009).

Goldman and Mutz (2011) contend that the artificial nature of experimental studies in which participants are often exposed to a controlled set of content that is not necessarily consistent with their actual news media use may accentuate the HMP. They argue that when researchers use survey methodology that examines real world media exposure in which citizens select news media that are more friendly to their political predispositions, the HMP will be muted, if not reversed. Results of their cross-cultural study did indeed reveal a “friendly” media phenomenon in that when people were asked to evaluate the source of news media that they use frequently, they found them to be supportive of their political perspective. This is especially true in societies that exhibit high levels of “media-party parallelism” (i.e., where news media partisanship corresponds to the ideologies of political parties). In such systems, people select ideologically consistent media and subsequently exhibit lower levels of perceived news bias.

Hartmann and Tanis’s (2012) study of the HMP in the context of the abortion issue notes that both in-group status and in-group identification moderate the HMP. Similar to past research showing that partisanship increases HMPs, this study found that in-group identification with the pro-choice or pro-life groups was a necessary condition of the HMP. It was also accentuated by the perception that the respondent’s in-group occupies a position of lower social status. Ariyanto, Hornsey, and Gallois (2007) found that individual group identification with issue-relevant groups was a predictor of HMP, particularly when it interacted with in-group/out-group identifiers of the source of the newspaper article; HMPs were strongest when a message source was attributed to an out-group source. Reid (2012) found that self-categorization theory was useful in explaining HMPs by demonstrating that in-group and out-group cues were influential in moderating the HMP.

Social interactions can have an impact on HMPs. Discussions with like-minded individuals can reinforce HMPs as reported by Eveland and Shah (2003), who found that interpersonal discussions within the echo-chamber of politically homogeneous networks reinforce the HMP, particularly among Republicans. On the other hand, discussions that include alternative perspectives can reduce HMPs. For example, media literacy programs can counteract the HMP (Vraga, Tully, Akin, & Rojas, 2012). In other circumstances though, greater awareness of the factors that shape news

media conduct has been associated with the HMP, as is the case in one study conducted in Singapore where HMP was particularly salient among those exhibiting high awareness of the government’s role in controlling information (Chia, Yong, Wong, & Koh, 2007).

### Effects of Hostile Media Perceptions.

As evidenced by the studies cited above, Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) spurred a steady stream of research that has continued to this day. While researchers in this area have used the terms “Hostile Media Perception” and “Hostile Media Effect” interchangeably, it would seem to be useful to follow the example of “third-person” research and use the former term to refer to the perception itself, and HME to describe the potential consequences of such perceptions.

Research shows that the HMP has a variety of consequences. For example, many studies have considered its role in motivating issue-relevant behavioral engagement. Barnidge, Sayre, and Rojas (2015) found that HMPs served as motivation to engage in political participation. Kim (2015) also found that the HMP was associated with both political participation and support for restrictions on opinion poll reporting. Choi, Park, and Chang (2011) showed that the HMP motivates advocacy groups to prefer more aggressive strategies of confrontation. Studies have shown that the HMP motivates people to take corrective action by speaking out in public to correct potential misconceptions (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Rojas, 2010). Hwang, Pan, and Sun (2008) demonstrated that HMP with respect to news coverage of social issues served as a source of motivation to discuss those issues in public. Arpan and Nabi (2011) found that news bias perceptions, enhanced by anger, motivate interest in seeking more information.

While many of these studies suggest that the HMP can provide positive effects like the motivation for engagement, other research indicates that the HMP can have negative effects that would seem to contradict the engagement argument. Tsfaty (2007) found that HMPs fostered social alienation among Arab citizens of Israel. HMP may also reduce trust and inhibit political efficacy (Tsfaty & Cohen, 2005a). These somewhat contradictory findings leave open questions about why the HMP would seem to encourage social action under some conditions and passivity under others.

Other research has linked the HMP to perceptions of public opinion. In the context of the controversy over the use



of primates in laboratory research, Gunther and Chia (2001) observed that HMPs had an effect on perceptions of public opinion in the direction of the perceived news bias. Huge and Glynn (2010) found that while the HMP predicted perceptions of public opinion, it was not as strong as the effect of individuals projecting their personal opinions on public opinion.

When individuals perceive the news media to have a definitive bias against their own opinion, they are likely to be concerned about the effects of that media bias on others. Gunther and Chia (2001) use the term, “persuasive press inference” to refer to the process by which individuals presume influence of perceived news biases on the public at large. These concerns are likely to be most pronounced for media perceived to reach large audiences. As the PPI deals with perceived media effects, we will discuss it in greater detail in a later section.

#### Future directions for HMP research.

There are certain basic questions related to the HMP that merit further investigation. As noted, HMP research has revealed a contrast effect in terms of people’s perceptions of news bias, which seems to contradict other research on selective perception that demonstrates the human tendency to assimilate factual information in order to better fit an individual’s predispositions. Future research could be useful in specifying the conditions that produce assimilation and contrast effects. Additionally, as mentioned above, researchers have identified several different mediating processes that might account for the HMP (i.e., selective recall, selective categorization, different judgment standards, and persistent cultural beliefs). While evidence has provided some indication that favors some over others (Perloff, 2015), more research can further tease out the relative importance of these factors, as well as the conditions that make them more or less relevant.

Future research can help to further clarify the relationship between partisanship and involvement as they together relate to the HMP. As mentioned above, partisanship is a political predisposition that leads to the HMP, with liberals seeing the media as having a conservative bias and conservatives seeing the news media as having a liberal bias. Involvement may serve as a moderator that amplifies this relationship with highly involved partisans on both sides of the spectrum having relatively stronger perceptions of media bias. It is

important to note that political partisanship is a fairly stable predisposition that is consistent across time and across a host of aligned issues. Involvement, on the other hand, may vary from issue to issue. One person may be highly involved on one particular issue, but not very involved on another. Moreover, there are different types of involvement such as cognitive versus emotional involvement, with the former more connected to levels of knowledge and the latter characterized by high levels of passion. They may indeed be correlated, but they are distinct. Similarly, there are differences between value-relevant involvement tied closely to an individual’s self-identity, outcome-relevant involvement tied closely to one’s personal goals, and impression-relevant involvement tied to the image that one projects to others (Cho & Boster, 2004; Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Johnson & Eagly, 1990). These different types of involvement may manifest different relationships to the HMP, something that Choi, Yang, and Chang (2009) have begun to explore. While researchers have started to unpack the role of involvement in processes related to the HMP, there is plenty of room for future research to more fully differentiate the different types and dimensions of involvement and further specify the nature of its various relationships to partisanship and the HMP.

Research should also look closer at the relationship between involvement and the HMP, which seems to conflict with the expectations of ELM/HSM processing (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). These models maintain that involvement leads to more systematic information processing. Yet, when individuals are asked to make judgments regarding the bias of a media message, involvement leads to greater perceptions of bias—an indication that they are engaging in a simpler, heuristic process of message evaluation. This raises some interesting questions: Can this paradox be reconciled? Does political ideology trump the typical influence of involvement?

Research on HMPs has largely treated political ideology as a unidimensional concept. In fact, media researchers often measure political ideology by combining questions about economic and social-political ideology into an index. While these two dimensions are no doubt highly correlated, there are individuals who express opposite positions on the two measures (e.g., an individual who is economically conservative, but socially liberal). In such circumstances, which dimension is more important in shaping media perceptions and subsequent choices about which media to use? Moreover, within ideological partisan groups, there are vast differences

between individuals who are being grouped together. Researchers could examine HMPs in partisan groups to determine whether there are differences by gender, socioeconomic status, or other factors that would indicate that HMP is a moderated outcome.

In the new media environment that includes not only traditional media, but Internet-based media, social media and entertainment programs that serve as news sources for many individuals, ideological predispositions are likely to play an ever more important role in individuals' choices about where to get news and information. Many traditional media in this more competitive media environment have become more likely to use ideological perspectives to differentiate themselves from competition (e.g., Fox News, MSNBC, Rush Limbaugh). Online blogs with an identifiable ideological bent have become more prominent sources of news and information. As more news and information come from exposure to partisan media, citizens are more likely to come in contact with media messages that contain charges of bias regarding other media sources. For example, journalists and guests on Fox News often level charges of bias against other news organizations. Similarly, many blogs from both the left and the right dedicate considerable attention to issues of bias in mainstream news media. Social media also carries such commentary. As a result of the greater attention to mainstream media biases by various partisan information sources, HMPs may become even more pronounced and widely shared.

Individuals, perhaps motivated by the confirmation bias, are increasingly avoiding media they consider hostile and are selecting news sources consistent with their ideological predispositions. This raises contradicting expectations about the implications for HMPs. On one hand, the choices that people make that tailor their media choices to their individual ideologies may exhibit reduced perceptions of news media bias as the partisans whose media perceptions typically drive the HMP now base their observations on their own news media diets. This phenomenon might be particularly acute for individuals who depart from their media diets occasionally and engage in selective perception to confirm their bias suspicions about non-preferred media. On the other hand, the partisan media diet may reinforce the perception that mainstream news media are biased. Future research can weigh in here in two respects. First, research can help adjudicate between these countervailing expectations, as well as identifying the moderating conditions that might

favor one outcome over the other. Second, researchers can examine media selections in the changing media landscape as an effect of the HMP.

As the news media landscape has become more partisan, so too has the political landscape. Quite a bit of attention has been paid to growing partisanship in government and politics (Galvin, 2013; Harbridge, 2015; Newman & Siegle, 2010). Similarly, elections and electoral politics have become more partisan (Jones, 2015; Kinsella, McTague, & Raleigh, 2015; Payett, 2015). Other research indicates that citizens are also becoming more ideologically polarized, exhibiting greater partisan hostility and incivility (Miller & Conover, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014). In this increasingly partisan environment, we would expect greater polarization and intensity in HMPs, as well as greater public debate over the nature of news media biases. The HMP may be seen as a special case of partisan-motivated reasoning (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014; Levendusky, 2013) in which partisan identification influences understandings of reality as one is exposed to new information. Researchers may want to do more to look at HMP in this context, examining linkages and parallels to theory and research on partisan-motivated reasoning.

One of the interesting things to note about HMP research is that researchers have studied it using both surveys that ask respondents about their perceptions of news media bias (e.g., Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998) and experiments that demonstrate differences in bias perceptions among individuals examining the same news story, at times attributed to different sources (e.g., Arpan & Raney, 2003). One might expect that the choice of method would make a difference; however, Hansen and Kim's meta-analysis indicates that results are similar across methods. As surveys tend to examine broader media perceptions, while experiments tend to capture attitudes toward a particular news story, the similarity in results is surprising. Future research could contribute by looking at survey vs. experimental results more closely.

Future research might also examine whether there are any differences in the nature of HMPs as they pertain to bias perceptions regarding individual journalists, news stories, media organizations, and the media as a whole. As most of the experimental research demonstrating the HMP is based on exposure to single messages, research that takes a longitudinal approach would not only allow a more dynamic picture of the stability of HMPs over time, but as Perloff (2015) points out, would allow researchers to examine the



nature of causal relationships.

As more and more research is being conducted on the HMP, we are starting to learn more about the effects of this perception. One of the effects noted above concerned the paradoxical findings regarding the potential of the HMP to engage and disengage, to empower and disempower, and to mobilize and demobilize citizens. While these effects were not necessarily directly contradictory, they do motivate the search for the factors and structural conditions that can reconcile them. Under what conditions does HMP encourage activation and under what conditions does it lead to passivity?

Other research seems to indicate that the HMP fosters increased levels of civic engagement, though other research indicates that it sharpens in-group/out-group distinctions and fosters alienation, distrust, and even lowered political efficacy. The HMP in an era of increasing partisanship may contribute to growing intolerance, incivility and hostility as it reinforces the attitudes and behaviors of partisans. As researchers begin to expand their conceptions of potential effects of HMP, they can help to illuminate its linkages to factors operating in the larger political context.

As noted above, research on the effects of the HMP has spilled over into the area perceived media effects. It is likely that people who see the news media as being more biased will perceive the potential effects of that bias as being stronger. This notion is referred to as the Persuasive Press Inference (PPI), which will be addressed below.

### **Media Effects Perception Concepts and Processes**

In the previous section, we examined theory and research on public perceptions of the media including perceptions of media trustworthiness, credibility, and bias. Each of these perceptions involves audience impressions of news content and the performance of journalists, media organizations, and the media as an institution. Clearly, individuals recognize that the media, media content, and media performance are important in their lives and to the functioning of society as a whole. People believe the media are important because they believe that the media have effects, whether they be news media, entertainment media, video games, advertising, or other forms of media. They care about news media trustworthiness and credibility because they believe that the me-

dia are their window to what is happening in the world. They worry about media bias, not only because they do not want their view of the world to be distorted, but also because they worry about the effect that biased media portrayals will have on others. Part of the motivation for developing perceptions of the media comes from concerns about the potential negative effects that media have (or the potential positive effects that they fail to have) on oneself, on others, and on society at large. In the process, people develop lay theories about media effects that guide them in developing media effects perceptions. In turn, the perceptions of media that they develop may have their own effects.

Just as there are some basic psychological concepts and processes that color the development of media perceptions, there are also processes that shape the development of media effects perceptions. In general, people use media that they like and avoid media that they do not like. They tend to be defensive of the media they use. For example, people who play video games tend to emphasize the positive effects of game playing and downplay the negative effects. People are likely to be similarly defensive about the effects of other media that they use--emphasizing their positive effects and downplaying negative effects. The reverse may be true for the media they disdain. Conservatives may decry the brainwashing effects of the liberal media, while ignoring the potentially negative influence of watching Fox News and listening to Rush Limbaugh's radio show. Liberals may express a similar pattern of egocentric, ideologically derived media effects perceptions. Partisans from both groups may also develop biased perceptions of media and media effects for media they do not use very often as they make inferences based on stereotypes. Such ideologically driven media perceptions are likely to be amplified in the current polarized political environment, as well as further accentuated by the emergence of partisan media, including the Internet and social media.

When individuals are asked about their impressions of the media and media effects in general terms, their judgments may be subject to a negativity bias. They may exclude the media they use personally from the judgment process. Conservatives think about the "lamestream" media, while liberals think about the "establishment" media. In the process, they may be assimilating the small subset of media they do use, and contrasting the vast amount of media sources that they do not use and for which they harbor negative feelings. When asked to make judgments about the effects of the

generalized media, negative effects may be inflated and positive effects minimized.

Other factors may contribute to a negative bias in media effects perceptions. First, people may emphasize the negative because it makes for more provocative conversation. That is, people are more likely to become engaged in conversations involving complaints about the negative effects of media than they are to participate in conversations praising the positive effects. Media and media effects are in a sense a lightning rod for public criticism. Moreover, people are more likely to be concerned about perceived negative effects and more blasé about positive effects. Negative media content and effects may also be more vivid and seen as having more of an impact. For example, violent images in the news or entertainment television, or in video games have a more memorable impact for use in subsequent effects judgments. Ultimately then, we may all develop perceptions of media effects, but these perceptions may overestimate their negative effects and downplay positive effects.

There are other psychological processes that come into play when individuals are asked to make distinctions between the effects of media on the self and on other people. When it comes to negative media effects, people tend to perceive these negative effects to be greater on other people than they are on oneself, a tendency known as the “Third-person Perception” (3PP). Theorists have suggested several psychological principles to account for this differential in perceived negative effects. It may be that people are engaging in an optimistic (or immunity) bias in ignoring potential negative consequences of media exposure on themselves, while recognizing the negative impact on others. An ego-enhancing bias in which people hold the view that they are superior to others may also account for the differential. If an ego-enhancing bias is at work for potentially negative media effects, research results indicate that it may not be as relevant for positive media effects as there is less research evidence to support a first-person perception (1PP) for positive media messages. That is, the perception that we are more affected than other people by positive media does not appear to be as pronounced nor as consistent as the 3PP for negative media effects. Another psychological process may also contribute to differences in perceived negative effects--different implicit lay theories of media effects used in making judgments regarding negative effects on self from the one used to make judgments about the effects on others. In judging effects on others, we may employ a quasi-magic bullet or hypodermic

needle model of media effects in which we see other people as passive recipients of powerful media effects. When asked to make judgments about the same negative media content on ourselves, we may employ a lay theory more akin to a limited-effects model. That is, we perceive ourselves as active recipients of media messages, able to deflect and mitigate potentially harmful effects.

Researchers examining such differences in perceptions of media effects have noted that perceptions of negative effects on others are different depending on how the “other” comparison group is constituted. Individuals tend to perceive negative effects on others as being greater when the specified comparison group is perceived as being more different from oneself (known as the “social-distance corollary” of the 3PP). That is, individuals tend to see people who are a lot like them as being less affected than people who are different from them. Again, there may be different psychological processes at work that might account for this finding. It might reflect an in-group vs. out-group bias extension of the ego-enhancing bias. People may utilize an ego-enhancing strategy by assuming that members of the out-group will be more affected. Alternatively, such social distance judgments may result from perceived differences in the exposure of the comparison groups in which socially distant groups are seen as being more negatively affected because they are assumed to use more of the media content in question. Stereotypes about various comparison groups may also come into play. These stereotypes may be related to perceived differences in cognitive capacity of different groups to resist negative effects or in perceived differences in exposure to the content in question.

These basic psychological processes (and potentially others) may be at work as people derive perceptions regarding media effects. Researchers who examine media effects perceptions have drawn on them as part of their explanations for interpreting research results. As in research on media perceptions described above, more attention has been paid to the perceptions themselves than the consequences of those perceptions. In the section below, we assess theory and research concerning media effects perceptions, including the effects of effects perceptions and the future of research in this area.

## Perceptions of Media Effects and Effects of Perceived Media Effects

In this section, we address two distinct areas of Presumed Influence (PI) research that examine media effects perceptions: the Persuasive Press Inference (PPI) and the Third-person Perception (3PP). PPI is to some degree an outcome of the HMP (see above). Individuals who perceive the news media to be hostile to their viewpoint are likely to be concerned about the influence that biased coverage will have on the public. In other words, perceiving news as biased is likely to accentuate concerns about the undue influence of a biased and powerful press (i.e., PPI) on the larger public. Research on the 3PP examines differences between perceived media effects on oneself and on other people, though 3PP research tends to be broader than PPI in that extends beyond looking at the effects of news media to include also perceptions of the effects of entertainment media. Though the connection to HMP is not as readily obvious as it is for PPI, the 3PP that does focus on perceived effects of news media may also have a link to HMP in that the HMP may accentuate perceptions of media effects on others. In sections that follow, we discuss the research on both the PPI and the 3PP, including the variety of the consequent outcomes and implications.

### Persuasive Press Inference and Effects.

Mutz and Soss (1997) once explored the ability of the news media to move public opinion by gauging whether a newspaper with an editorial agenda could sway public sentiment in its favor. The attempt was unsuccessful — readers' opinions did not budge — but when those unaffected readers were asked to estimate their community's stance on the issue, they figured others' opinions had changed. This finding illustrates one possible consequence of presumed media influence: News messages may be perceived to affect public opinion, even if they never actually do.

This possibility is explored by the Persuasive Press Inference (PPI), a process where individuals judge the slant of news coverage. The PPI assumes that content has influenced the public, and thus figure that public opinion is consistent with the perceived bias of the media (Gunther, 1998). Research on the PPI has focused specifically on news media messages. Researchers have noted that when news coverage

of a given issue is perceived as favoring a particular viewpoint, estimates of public opinion are seen as consistent with that perceived slant (Mutz & Soss, 1997; Gunther & Chia, 2001). Several experiments have demonstrated this process. In these studies, respondents who read news stories manipulated to be biased in favor of a particular viewpoint believed that public opinion tilted in the direction given preference within the stories (Gunther, 1998; Gunther et al., 2001). The PPI has been explored for issues such as physician-assisted suicide (Gunther & Christen, 2002), use of animals in research (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001), the health hazards of radon gas (Gunther & Christen, 2002), and the use of a controversial agricultural growth hormone (Gunther, 1998). Compared to the other areas of research overviewed in this article, relatively few studies have explored the PPI (see Table 1).

### History and rationale.

The PPI may appear to require a great deal of effort from the audience. Is it reasonable to expect that members of the news audience judge media content, imagine how that content would be received by the rest of the audience, and then infer what everybody else is thinking based on that perceived media influence? In answer to such a question, Gunther (1998) explained that an information-rich media environment and a host of cognitive quirks make the PPI process almost effortless for the perceiver.

The first proposition of the PPI is that people are able to extrapolate from a small sample of news content to form more general impressions of news coverage. When proposing PPI, Gunther (1998) noted that a small sample of news coverage are relatively easy to find. This observation is even more applicable to today's hyper-connected world, where a brief scroll through a social media feed may result in exposure to dozens of news headlines. This small sample of news coverage can then easily be seen as representative of the wider media environment. The law-of-small-numbers bias demonstrates that people are prone to think of a small sample as representative of a population (Tversky & Kahneman, 1971). For the PPI, this means that if people see a handful of news articles slanting in a particular direction, they may believe those articles are representative of the slant perpetuated in the wider news media landscape. In PPI experiments where respondents read a single news article and then estimated public opinion, there is evidence that respondents

believed public opinion was consistent with the perceived slant of the news article *only when* that article was seen as representative of the slant in media coverage in general (Gunter et al., 2001).

PPI's second proposition is that people generally believe others are exposed to news media. Mass media is, by definition, far-reaching — but this seemingly obvious fact is critical to the logic of PPI. A news message's power to persuade others is meaningless if the others never see the message. The perceived exposure of others to news content is thus a necessary condition for the PPI, and there is evidence that people do tend to recognize the sweeping reach of media messages (Parisot, 1988).

The final and most critical proposition of PPI is that people believe news coverage affects the opinions of those who consume it. This proposition involves assumptions individuals make about the power of news media, as well as assumptions they make about the vulnerability of the news audience. As discussed above, research concerning the presumed influence of media shows that people generally believe media to be a powerful force (Perloff, 2009). When a belief in powerful media connects with the tendency to believe others are vulnerable to outside influence, it is easy to see how individuals might come to believe media help shape others' opinions (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). As Gunther (1998) explained, "people can easily form an idea of what others are thinking by inferring it from the information they think others are getting" (p. 489).

### Perceptions of public opinion.

The PPI process outlines one way in which perceptions of media content are related to perceptions of public opinion. Scholars have long been interested in individuals' perceptions of what others are thinking or doing because it is often the case that these social perceptions guide individuals' own attitudes and behaviors. Those who sense more support for their ideas are more willing to express those opinions (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997; Dvir-Gvirsman, Garrett, & Ts-fati, 2015), and conversely, those who sense they have less support for their views are less likely to speak out (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). People are also more likely to behave in ways they see as consistent with others' behavior (Prentice & Miller, 1993), and conform their judgments to fit in with those around them (Asch, 1956). Perceptions of what others are thinking and doing constitute the social reality that in-

dividuals navigate on a daily basis.

Because of the impact these social perceptions have on how individuals think and behave themselves, scholars have worked to understand the factors that contribute to these perceptions. The projection effect, the tendency to project our opinions onto others, is perhaps the most well documented of the contributors to perceived public opinion. As Fields and Schuman (1976) put it, people "look out into the world and somehow see their own opinions reflected back" (p. 437). Researchers have documented this tendency to project personal opinions onto others across a variety of preferences and behaviors (Brown, 1982; Whitley, 1998; Watt & Larkin, 2010). Why are individuals so quick to assume others think or act as they do? Ross et al. (1977) suggested that people tend to surround themselves with like-minded individuals, and therefore their most accessible cues about public opinion come from a sample that thinks as they do. It may also be the case that projection is driven by a need to maintain self-esteem by thinking others support our views (Marks & Miller, 1988).

If projection were the only force shaping perceptions of public opinion, it would follow that everyone would believe themselves to be in the opinion majority at all times. But people do not always believe others share their views, and the PPI offers a countervailing force to the powerful urge to project. One of the more interesting implications of the PPI is that it may help explain why a person believes public opinion to be hostile relative to their own opinion. This implication is possible because of the tendency to view news content as biased in an undesirable fashion, a tendency chronicled in Hostile Media Perception research (reviewed above). If news consumers tend to view news coverage as hostile to their own views, and they assume others have been influenced by that biased content, then it follows that they would assume others' opinions are consistent with that slanted coverage. In other words, the vulnerable audience of others is thought to be swayed by content judged as unfavorable to one's preferred position. The PPI thus outlines how a media perception, HMP, can be consequential (Figure 1).

Projection and the PPI appear to go head-to-head as contributors to perceptions of public opinion, and the competing processes would predict different outcomes. On the one hand, projection would lead a perceiver to the conclusion that the opinion climate is congenial. On the other hand, the PPI would account for the impact of undesirable news media influence, leading to the conclusion that the opinion climate



is unfriendly, or at least relatively unfriendly, to an individual's position. Scholars who have simultaneously tested the influence of projection and the PPI on perceptions of public opinion have demonstrated that personal opinion exerts both a direct effect on perceived public opinion and an indirect effect through perceived media slant (Gunther & Chia, 2001; Gunther & Christen, 2002). In other words, the processes can occur together. At times, the PPI has been shown to offset projection. For example, supporters of physician-assisted suicide imagined a friendly opinion climate when they saw news coverage as friendly or neutral to the issue, but believed public opinion was against their position when they saw news coverage as hostile to their views (Gunther & Christen, 2002). However, Hume and Glynn (2010) found that perceived media bias did not explain any additional variance in perceived public opinion after accounting for the role of projection. The discrepancy may be because the latter study linked perceptions of public opinion to perceptions of hostile media bias, whereas other PPI studies looked at the association between perceived public opinion and perceived news slant — a slant that is often, but not always, a hostile one.

The fact that perceptions of media are not always hostile, at least in an absolute sense, further complicates the dynamic between PPI and projection. As discussed above, hostile media judgments can be relative: Two groups of partisans may agree on the slant of news media coverage, but the group not favored by the slant will see a steeper tilt away from its position, compared to the group favored by the slant. The group seeing a friendly slant in media coverage would not see public opinion as hostile because the media that is presumed to influence others' opinions actually has a favorable slant (Gunther et al., 2001). The existence of the relative HMP reminds that hostile media is not necessarily seen as influential, and thus affecting public opinion. To the contrary, the crux of PPI is that public opinion is inferred from the perceived slant of news coverage, regardless of whether that slant is thought to be hostile.

### Accuracy of perceptions.

The PPI may help researchers more accurately predict perceptions of public opinion, but it does not necessarily improve (or worsen) the accuracy of those public opinion estimates. In a situation where a perceiver holds the majority opinion, the projection process would encourage them to believe others think as they do. In this case, projection would

result in an accurate assessment of public opinion; however, if the perceiver believes news coverage has been favorable to the minority, the presumed influence of that coverage on others might constrain the projection effect. The result might be that, due to the presumed influence of media coverage, the perceiver thinks public opinion is less congenial than it really is. On the other hand, a perceiver with a minority opinion would be tempted to project it onto others — and perceptions of undesirable media influence on others could theoretically counter that tendency, bringing the perceiver's public opinion assessment closer to reality.

Perceptions of public opinion are of great interest to researchers, as discussed earlier, and it can be particularly interesting when those perceptions are actually misperceptions.

Research on pluralistic ignorance shows that people often hold faulty ideas about what others are thinking or doing (O'Gorman, 1986). Even slight miscalculations about the opinion climate can be consequential, as a situation is created where those with opposing opinions “react to each other in terms of the perceived and not necessarily the actual relative strengths of the two factions,” (Mullen & Smith, 1990, p. 505).

### Alternative links between media and public opinion.

There are, to be sure, more straightforward explanations that account for the relationship between perceptions of news content and perceptions of public opinion. A challenge of PPI research is to find the indirect path of presumed influence in the midst of a tangle of other routes linking news media and perceived public opinion. These alternative paths include the idea that media contain cues about what others are thinking that may directly shape social reality, the idea that media may sway personal opinions — which would then be projected onto others, and the idea that rather than shape public opinion, media simply reflect it.

First, journalists often describe the state of public opinion in their news reports. The most obvious way of doing so is to report polling results, and doing so has become an increasingly common practice in news reporting (Frankovic, 2005). These explicit public opinion cues are then easily accessible when individuals are prompted to estimate what others are thinking (Iyengar, 1990; Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), and research has shown that people can accurately recall information from polls (McAllister & Studlar, 1991). It comes as



no surprise, then, that when people read news stories featuring poll results, their estimates of public opinion tend to reflect the polling information provided in the news (Zerback, Koch, & Kramer, 2015). Additionally, on the Internet, user-generated comments and evaluations could be viewed as indicators of public opinion on the news topic.

Besides including explicit information about the opinion climate, media also provide plenty of anecdotal indicators of public opinion through exemplars. The voices presented in news coverage, including both sources and bystanders (McLeod & Hertog, 1992) are thus an accessible sample of public opinion. For example, those who consume media that is ideologically similar to their own views perceive the public opinion climate to be more congenial (Dvir-Gvirsman, Garrett, & Tsfati, 2015), and conversely, those who consume media dissimilar to their views see the opinion climate as hostile (Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011). In this direct relationship between media and perceived public opinion, differences in perceptions of public opinion are explained by the different news content people consume and the exemplars they see in that coverage. Similarly, the perceived slant of news coverage may offer a direct impression of public sentiment. Rather than perceive a slant in news coverage and assume it has influenced others, news consumers may assume that media coverage reflects current public opinion. In other words, rather than news coverage shaping public opinion, it may be the case that individuals believe public opinion shapes news coverage.

A final alternative explanation for the relationship between media and perceived public opinion is that media slant may directly affect personal opinion, which would then be projected onto the public. Gunther (1998) found that respondents who read an article with a favorable slant toward an agricultural growth hormone reported being more favorable to the issue themselves, compared to those who read an article with an unfavorable slant. Similarly, Zerback et al. (2015) observed that those who read a news article featuring arguments supporting a proposed railway extension were more supportive of the proposal themselves. In these studies, personal opinion was related to perceived public opinion, suggesting that the slant of the articles may have affected perceived public opinion by first swaying personal opinion. This direct influence of media slant on personal opinion may occur when the news topic is unfamiliar and the positions featured in news coverage do not conflict with any pre-existing, higher-order attitudes (e.g., partisanship, group

membership).

### Support for the presumed influence mechanism.

There is clear evidence of multiple links between news media content and perceptions of public opinion. The PPI does not rule out these alternative ways that media help shape social reality. People do gain impressions of public opinion from cues embedded in media content, and media messages often do affect personal opinions, which may then be projected onto others. It is also possible that media may be seen as reflecting public opinion. These alternative accounts of how media may impact perceptions of public opinion could work simultaneously with the PPI. Rather than eliminate the possibility of a direct effect of news media on social perceptions, the challenge of PPI research is to provide support for the path between news content and perceived public opinion carved by presumed influence. The PPI proposes that one way media affect perceptions of public opinion is through a process where individuals assume others have been influenced by news coverage. This process identifies presumed influence as a mediating link between media perceptions and perceived public opinion. PPI researchers have used several tactics to look for evidence of this presumed media influence.

First, if news media simply provide cues about public opinion and the PPI is not at work, then the knowledge that others have been exposed to biased media content would not have any bearing on perceptions of public opinion. News consumers would get their cues about public opinion directly from the content they consume, regardless of whether they think anyone else has seen that content. However, there is evidence that this is not the case. Several studies have shown that believing others have been exposed to news content does affect the relationship between media perceptions and perceived public opinion. Gunther et al. (2001) found that perceived slant and the perceived reach of media interact, such that in high-reach conditions, the perceived slant of a news article was positively associated with perceived public sentiment. In the low-reach condition, the manipulation of the article slant did not result in a corresponding change in perceived public opinion. Perceived news slant was only related to perceived public opinion when the perceiver believed others had been exposed to the message.

Another tactic that researchers have used to test the presumed influence mechanism of the PPI is to experimentally

manipulate embedded public opinion cues and story slant simultaneously. If perceptions of public opinion stem mostly from public opinion cues featured in media coverage, then the slant of the article should not affect perceived public opinion when such cues are present. In other words, perceptions of public opinion should follow the implicit cues (e.g., exemplars) or explicit cues (e.g., polling results) rather than the perceived slant of news coverage. To test this, Gunther (1998) manipulated story slant (favorable/unfavorable) and an implicit public opinion cue about an agricultural growth hormone (anecdotal quotes from members of the public). Results showed that the manipulated slant of the article affected estimates of public opinion in the condition with the implicit cue and without it. Similar results were found in another study that manipulated story slant alongside a more explicit public opinion cue (the story informed respondents which position was held by a majority of the public). In this study, Gunther and Christen (1999) found that there was a main effect of story slant on public opinion estimates, but no main effect for the explicit cue of being informed as to which opinion was held by the majority of the public. The fact that perceived news slant affected perceived public opinion regardless of whether other cues were present is evidence that people gave some consideration to the impact the articles would have on others' opinions.

However, it could be the case that those news articles were seen as reflecting public opinion, rather than shaping it. One way of demonstrating that the relationships observed are due to presumed influence is to link perceived changes in public opinion to the timing of news reports. In several studies, respondents read recently published news articles and then reported that a change in public opinion occurred "in the last few days" (Gunther, 1998; Gunther & Christen, 1999). Additionally, if news coverage is seen as reflecting public opinion, then there should be a positive relationship between personal opinion and media coverage similar in strength to the positive relationship between personal opinion and perceived public opinion. In other words, people would project their own opinions onto others and then project that perceived public opinion onto the news media. This would result in a positive association between personal opinion and perceptions of news coverage; however, PPI studies have demonstrated the relationship between personal opinion and perceived news slant (Gunther & Christen, 2002). Indeed, the very existence of the HMP demonstrates that there tends to be a negative association between personal

opinion and perceptions of news coverage. The lack of a positive relationship between personal opinion and perceived news slant, along with evidence linking perceived changes in public opinion to the timing of news reports, serve as evidence that media are seen as shaping, rather than reflecting, public opinion.

### Future directions for PPI research.

The PPI provides a framework for understanding one way that media content may affect perceptions of public opinion. Studies mapping the PPI process have shown that news consumers judge the slant of news content and then evaluate public opinion as being consistent with that slant. Studies showing that this relationship exists only when perceivers believe others have been exposed to the news content in question serve as evidence of presumed influence – the idea that individuals assume others have been influenced by news media, and thus those others hold opinions congruent with the slant advanced by media content. But because there are many explanations for the link between news content and perceived public opinion, more research should test whether the PPI is still a viable path after accounting for more direct explanations for the relationship between media and social perceptions (i.e., implicit and explicit cues as to the state of public opinion).

Future PPI research might explore the type of media consumer who is likely to anticipate powerful media effects, and in addition, who is most likely to use presumptions of media influence when estimating public opinion. Certain individuals may be more aware of the distribution of public opinion for an issue (e.g., those who are highly knowledgeable about an issue) and would not use perceived media slant as an indication of public opinion. Alternatively, it could be the case that those highly knowledgeable about and highly involved in an issue are those who are most concerned about media influence, and thus may pay more attention to the slant in coverage and the possibility that it would sway others. To date, moderators of the PPI process have been largely unexplored.

Perhaps the most critical contribution of the PPI is that it considers many possible relationships between media and social perceptions and offers a process for tracing the *unique* contribution of presumed media influence to perceptions of what others are doing and thinking. PPI research demonstrates that people believe media have effects on others, and

it does so without directly asking people whether media are influential. Demonstrating how media messages affect perceptions of what others are doing or thinking is valuable for researchers looking at how people might react to those social perceptions. Scholars have long since established that individuals may act or think in accordance with what they believe others around them are doing or thinking — but the bit of that process that attracts media scholars is that some of those perceptions come from media. Specifically, the PPI illustrates that social perceptions may fluctuate as a simple consequence of the presumed power of media messages. From there, researchers are able to explore how those impressions of what others are thinking or doing might affect the actions and thoughts of the perceiver, a task that is the focus of influence of presumed influence (IPI) studies.

### Third-person Perceptions and Effects.

Davison (1983) triggered an avalanche of research on the third-person phenomenon when he noted that individuals tend to see media effects on others as being greater than effects on themselves. Of the five specific of media perceptions research covered in this article, research on the Third-person Perception (3PP) has received the most attention with 200 articles identified by our literature search since 1992 (Table 1). Moreover, the 3PP has been documented for the perceived effects of a variety content such as news media, entertainment media, advertising, and video games.

Meta-analyses show that the 3PP has been an incredibly robust phenomenon (Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008; Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000). In their analysis of 106 3PP studies, Sun, Pan, and Shen (2008) found that the 3PP was consistently supported despite variations in methods and measurement. They also identified several significant moderators of the size of the 3PP gap, including level of anti-social content, perceived vulnerability of the comparison group, dissimilarity to self, and likelihood of exposure. An experiment by David, Liu, and Myser (2004) showed that the 3PP persisted despite manipulations intended to reduce it by informing participants of its self-serving underpinnings. Evidence on the 3PP and its consequences has been conducted in countries around the world including Australia, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hong Kong, Israel, Netherlands, Singapore, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan, and the United States with a surprising degree of consistency. The influence of this

concept has spread beyond the field of communication into research from other fields including public health, medicine, nutrition, public policy, education, psychology, social work, business, management, ergonomics, computer science, and transportation safety.

The 3PP has been found consistently across a variety of different contexts in which there is concern about harmful effects on the public stemming from news media, entertainment media, advertising, music, pornography, and video games. The 3PP has been found for perceived effects of news programming (Cohen et al., 1988; Price, Huang, & Tewksbury, 1997) as well as for the TV violence in entertainment programming (Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Innes & Zeitz, 1988; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999; Scharer, 2002). It occurs for reality TV (Leone, Peek, & Bissell, 2006), TV trial coverage (Salwen & Dupagne, 1999), election coverage (Innes & Zeitz, 1988; Salwen, 1998), and for the reporting of election polls (Kim, 2015; Price & Stroud, 2006). The 3PP has also been extended to forms of communication content such as the use of mobile phones for sexting (Wei & Lo, 2013), violent and misogynistic rap and death metal music (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997), video games (Hong, 2015; Scharrer & Leone, 2006; Zhong, 2009), and vulnerability to personal selling techniques (Tal-Or, Shilo, & Meister, 2009). In one ironic twist, Johnson, Goidel, and Climek (2014) found a 3PP in a situation when content was being taken away. When the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* went from being a daily to three-times-a-week publication, survey respondents perceived that other people would be more adversely affected.

The 3PP has been observed for a variety of different types of strategic communication messages including advertising for controversial products such as cigarettes, alcohol, and gambling (Shah, Faber, & Youn, 1999; Youn, Faber, & Shah, 2000), messages encouraging and discouraging smoking (Meirick, 2005) and alcohol use (David, Liu, & Myser, 2004), Holocaust denial advertising (Price, Huang, & Tewksbury, 1997), manipulative marketing techniques (Jung & Jo, 2013; Xie & Johnson, 2015), alcohol product placements (Shin & Kim, 2011), direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA) for prescription drugs (DeLorme, Huh, & Reid, 2006; Huh, Delorme & Reid, 2004; Huh & Langteau, 2007; Zwier & Bolink, 2011), political advertising (Cheng & Riffe, 2008; Cohen & Davis, 1991; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999; Wei & Lo, 2007), and public relations (Park & Salmon, 2005). Women in Singapore exhibited a 3PP regarding the



effects of advertising's potentially negative effects on body image (Chia, 2007; Chia, 2009), though the size of the 3PP was negatively associated with the desire to go on a diet. However, a study of perceived effects of media depictions of idealized body images in the U.S. (presumably advertising and/or entertainment media though not specified in this study) found the 3PP for men only (Park, Yun, McSweeney, & Gunther, 2007).

Given the degree of public concern over the effects of pornography, it is not surprising that several studies have examined 3PP in this context (Gunther, 1995; Lee & Tamborini, 2005; Lo & Wei, 2002; Reid et al., 2007; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996). Guerrero-Sole, Besalu, and Lopez-Gonzalez (2014) replicated the 3PP for violent, pornographic, and trash TV in Spain.

### Explanations for 3PP.

Given the robust nature of the 3PP, which has been observed in different communication content contexts, in a variety of different nations, in different sub-populations, and using a variety of different methodological techniques, researchers have tried to elaborate on the different perceptual mechanisms that would help explain why it occurs. While the theoretical explanations are numerous, research has failed to arrive at a consensus as to exactly what accounts for the 3PP. Most likely, there are a variety of different factors at play that may contribute differentially under different conditions.

### Assessment errors.

3PP researchers have often noted that given the pervasiveness of the tendency for people to see others as being more affected by negative media messages than they are themselves, some of these assessments must be erroneous. Either people are overestimating effects on others, underestimating effects on self, or both (Perloff, 1996). Some studies show that the overestimation of effects on others is to blame (Gunther, 1991; Perloff et al., 1992; Price, Tewksbury, & Huang, 1998). Cohen et al. (1988) found that individuals overestimate effects on others and underestimate effects on self, while Gunther and Thorson (1992) found that individuals tend to overestimate effects on self as well as on others. Douglas and Sutton (2004) attribute the differential to the underestimation of effects on self. To be sure, some of the differences in the

conclusions that have been reached on effects estimation may be due to the different content in question.

### Ego-enhancement.

The most common explanation rendered to account for the 3PP is that it is part of a self-serving strategy to bolster one's ego (see Brown, 1986) by trying to downplay effects on oneself relative to perceived effects on others (Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1999; Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Perloff, 2002). Feeling that one is less affected than others is presumed to enhance one's self-esteem. This interpretation is supported by two sets of research findings (discussed further below).

First, there is the first-person effect (1PP) finding (see Gunther & Mundy, 1993) that the differential perception disappears (and possibly reverses in some cases) when the media effect in question is positive (i.e., being immune to positive effects is not ego-gratifying). Perloff (1999) notes that, "researchers have argued that formats that are seen as 'not smart to be influenced by' (i.e., product advertisements) should lead to greater TPE [i.e., 3PP] than genres that lack this connotation (PSAs, prosocial campaigns, and news" (pp. 359-360). Some research supports this interpretation (e.g., Brosius & Engel 1996), while some does not (e.g., Chapin, 1999).

Second, a line of findings concerning the social distance corollary (see Cohen et al., 1988) shows that perceived effects on others increase for comparison groups that are more dissimilar from the research participant. Cohen et al.'s (1988) interpretation is that more distant comparison groups have less ego-enhancing potential.

### Optimistic bias.

Individuals who express a 3PP may also be engaging in an "optimistic bias," an explanation that is similar to ego-enhancing strategies (Shepperd et al., 2002; Weinstein, 1980). The optimistic bias is typically measured in much the same way as 3PP, by asking people to estimate their personal risk of experiencing negative consequences and comparing that to their estimation of the risk of others. As with the 3PP, individuals often see themselves as facing less risk than other people. In fact, the 3PP may be a special case of the optimistic bias expressed in the context of risk of experiencing harmful media effects. Explanations of the optimistic

bias include ego-enhancement (as explained above), self-presentation (a strategy of trying to present oneself in a positive way), and exerting control (a strategy of making oneself feel more in control over their destiny). Wei, Lo, and Lu (2007) conclude that while both the 3PP and optimistic bias may result from an ego-enhancing self-serving bias, they are conceptually distinct processes.

### *Paternalism.*

McLeod, Eveland, and Nathanson (1997) offer the explanation that the 3PP is an indication of an underlying paternalistic attitude in the people who exhibit the largest differentials. To be sure, such an attitude may be ego-enhancing in that paternalism implies an element of superiority. Moreover, paternalism may be at work in bridging the 3PP to consequences like censorship and the perception that others might need to be protected.

### *Biased perceptions.*

Tal-Or and Tsfati (2007) offered another explanation: the 3PP might be a function of biased perceptions. As non-neutral observers of one's own experience, individuals might not recognize the influence that media have on themselves (in the same way that teenagers may not recognize the benefits of education in enhancing their cognitive development). It is difficult for an individual to observe and fully appreciate how media products affect them. They may not feel affected at all when they play violent video games or are exposed to advertising. But logically, they may agree that other people out there are being affected. They may infer that the vast amount of money that is spent on advertising must mean that some people are being affected by it even if it does not feel like they are affected. Perloff (1996) notes that people may be more aware of the psychological vulnerabilities to media effects on others than they are on their own vulnerabilities.

### *Different media effects heuristics.*

Perloff (2002) noted that when respondents are asked to make effects judgments, it may be easier to imagine that a "faceless," generalized audience will be affected by the media than to imagine it affecting oneself. Building on this idea, it may be that individuals apply different implicit models of

media effects when making their judgments. Perhaps, when individuals are asked about effects on the general audience, people employ a quasi-magic bullet model, where media effects are seen as being direct and powerful on a passive audience. By contrast, they may recognize the role that they play in actively insulating themselves from direct effects. That is, they may be applying a less powerful, indirect, limited effects model when assessing effects on themselves (McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland, 2001). Perloff (1999) makes a similar point by invoking attribution theory to propose that individuals see themselves as able to defend themselves against negative messages, while inferring that others lack the dispositional ability to do so. In a study concerning the perceived effects of pro- and anti-tobacco and of alcohol advertisements, Meirick (2006) extended the notion that people have different implicit models of negative media effects to positive media effects and attempted to measure such media effects schema. While these attempts to unveil the mechanisms that people use to estimate effects on self and others have been productive, the lack of clear-cut answers should motivate further research.

As some research has cast doubt upon the conventional ego-enhancement and optimistic bias explanations (see Chapin, 2000; McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland, 2001; Salwen & Dupagne, 2003; Tal-Or & Tsfati, 2007), it is clear that more research is needed to evaluate these various explanations.

### *The social distance corollary.*

Cohen et al. (1988) proposed that one reason for the social distance corollary finding is that as the 3PP comparison group gets more socially distant from (or more unlike) the individual respondent, the less ego-enhancing utility they will have. This finding has been corroborated by numerous other studies (e.g., Jensen & Hurley, 2005; Paek et al., 2005; Tewksbury, 2002; Tsfati & Cohen, 2004; Zhong, 2009). Tsfati, Ribak, and Cohen (2005) found that parents tend to see other people's children as more affected by exposure to a telenovela than their own. In a recent example of this finding, Yu (2012) observed that mothers believed that TV food advertising has more impact on other people's children than on their own. Scherr, Muller, and Fast (2013) found that German students perceived greater effects of exposure to Rate My Professor evaluations for students at other universities, than for students at their own university. Additionally, the degree to which the social distance of comparison



groups influences affects perceptions has been shown to be malleable. For example, in a study of the perceived effects of Internet pornography, Tewksbury (2002) found that the 3PP increased when the size of the comparison group was larger. Shen et al.'s (2015) study, which used reality television, Internet pornography, and pro-social PSAs, found assimilation priming (asking people to name similarities between themselves and the average person) reduced the size of the 3PP, while contrast priming (asking people to name differences) increased it.

Alternatives interpretations have been proposed, such as Eveland et al. (1999), who provided evidence that a different process is at work. They indicate that individuals may invoke judgments about the perceived exposure of these comparison groups to the content in question. They then reason that the more exposed individuals in a given 3PP comparison group are to the content, the more affected they are perceived to be. Their results, which focused on rap and death metal music lyrics, showed that these exposure judgments accounted for quite a bit of the variance (relative to the size of perceived social differences) in the social distance comparison groups. This finding was corroborated by several subsequent studies (Lambe & McLeod, 2005; Meirick, 2005; and Wu & Koo, 2001).

Reid and Hogg (2005) found that both of these mechanisms might be at work in that the "normative fit" (similar to the perceived likelihood of exposure) of content (in this case, tabloid and print news and TV sitcoms) for a particular comparison group was a necessary condition for the social distance corollary to occur. For instance, a group that is seen as not likely to use the content in question is not likely to be seen as being affected by that type of content, even when their distance might yield ego-enhancing potential.

### Different approaches to measuring the 3PP.

Boyle, Schmierbach, and McLeod (2013) note that when the 3PP is the outcome variable for research, the methods used to study the perception are relatively inconsequential. In fact, copious research has demonstrated that the 3PP is a robust finding regardless of the negative media in question and regardless of how the differential is measured. However, these researchers note that when the 3PP is used as a predictor of various consequences, its measurement becomes more consequential. In the following section, research on the consequences of the 3PP will be addressed in more detail. For

now, we will consider issues related to how 3PP is assessed.

Many studies construct a subtractive score to represent the 3PP (e.g., Gunther, 1995; Gunther & Hwa, 1996) by starting with perceived effects on others and subtracting out perceived effects on self. These studies use that score as a predictor of 3PP consequences such as censorship. The subtractive score is logical given the argument that people who exhibit a large 3PP differential would exhibit greater support for content restrictions. There are a couple of issues with this procedure. First, we do not know which of the two measured factors is contributing to the size of the differential. If, for instance, all individuals feel that they are not at all affected by negative content, then all of the variance would be coming from perceived effects on others. Put another way, there would be no difference between the 3PP and perceived effects on others. Second, individuals with the same differential score would be treated the same, even one person with a gap of 2.0 on a 7-point scale might be on the low end of the scale and another person with the same 2.0 gap could be on the high end of the scale. Thus a person who thinks the content in question has little effect on self and others would receive the same differential score as someone who perceived powerful effects on both self and others.

In order to avoid these issues, McLeod, Detenber, and Eveland (2001) treated perceived effects on self and perceived effects on others as separate predictors. Finding that both types of perceived effects predict support for censorship is important, but it does not speak to the 3PE hypothesis that those who see others as affected more than themselves are most supportive of content restrictions.

Another measurement approach to this problem has been the use of the "diamond" model (as employed by McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Neuwirth & Frederick, 2002; Neuwirth, Frederick, & Mayo, 2002; and Shah, Faber, & Youn, 1999). This approach uses both the subtractive measure (other - self) as the representation of the 3PP and an additive (other + self) as a representation of the overall power of the media as predictors in the 3PE regression equation. In this way, the predictive power of the 3PP can be estimated after controlling for perceived effects.

Boyle, Schmierbach, and McLeod (2013) conducted an evaluation of the different methodological strategies that are used to assess the 3PP by analyzing 73 studies of the 3PP published in eight top communication journals between 1993 and 2007. More than three-quarters of the articles used the subtractive approach to represent the 3PP. While all but four

of these 3PE articles used the subtractive approach, only 12 of them used only the subtractive approach. The other articles employed several alternative approaches, including the diamond model. Overall, Boyle, Schmierbach, and McLeod (2013) identified four approaches to testing the relationship between 3PP and its consequences: 1) the subtractive only approach; 2) separate measures of effects on self and others; 3) the subtractive approach controlling for effects on self (or a related, but previously untested model controlling for effects on others); and 4) the diamond model. They compared these models by applying each of them to two previously published data sets (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997 and Eveland et al., 1999). Their conclusion was that each model offers its own unique insights based on the different way that it conceptualizes effects perceptions. Future research should systematically investigate each of these models in order to provide a complete picture of what is going on.

### Message desirability.

While much of the attention of 3PP research has focused on concerns about the effects of potential harmful forms of mediated communication (i.e., socially undesirable messages), a considerable amount of research has examined questions regarding what happens when the content in question has positive effects (i.e., socially desirable messages). Do people still see others as more affected by positive messages? Or does the 3PP reverse to a first-person perception (1PP) in which people see themselves as being more affected? For potentially undesirable messages, it is clear that seeing oneself as being less affected than others would be ego-enhancing, but for positive messages, it is more complicated. When a message is positive (e.g., a PSA designed to prevent drug use), would it be more ego-enhancing to be less easily manipulated by media messages or to be more affected in the socially desirable direction? Given such contradictory theoretical expectations, it is not surprising that the results for positive messages have not been nearly as clear cut as those for negative messages.

Indeed, research has provided support for both the 3PP and the 1PP for positive messages. For example, Mackert et al. (2014) found a 3PP among hospital workers regarding the effects of hospital posters promoting frequent hand washing. Pariera (2015) found a 3PP gap for sex education, in which other people were seen as being more positively affected than the self. Eveland and McLeod (1999) found that other people

were seen as more affected by rap lyrics condemning violence and misogyny toward women. In other research, a 1PP has emerged for positive messages. Lin (2013a) found that individuals thought that they were more positively affected by watching the environmental documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth," than other people. Leung and Lo (2015) observed 3PP for both anti- and pro-drug use online messages. Lin's (2013b) study of online gamers found 1PPs for the positive effects of playing games online. Schmierbach, Boyle, Xu, and McLeod (2011) found evidence of a 1PP for the positive effects of playing video games, especially among heavy game players.

Elder, Douglas, and Sutton (2006) examined the relationship between social distance and 1PPs and 3PPs. While perceived effects on self were lower for both positive and negative media messages (i.e., supporting a 3PP), in-group and out-group differences were consistent with expectations. For negative media effects, out-groups were seen as more affected, but for positive messages, the in-group was seen as being more affected.

Most 3PP research problematically assumes that message content is inherently positive or negative. Some media content may have both positive and negative consequences (e.g., movies). Other content (e.g., video games) may be seen as having positive effects by some people and negative effects by other people. Moreover, as one might expect in the case of the example of anti-drug messages, moderators may play a big role in determining whether 3PPs or 1PPs are observed. For example, we might expect that younger adults with more countercultural attitudes about drug use would exhibit a 3PP, while older adults who may be less open to drug legalization to exhibit a 1PP. Given these factors that complicate assumptions about whether the content in question is universally positive or negative, it may be necessary to measure each respondent's perception of message desirability rather than simply to assume it to be universally positive or negative (Eveland & McLeod, 1999).

More research is needed to clarify the inconsistent results concerning effects perceptions for positive messages. It does seem that when findings exhibit either the 1PP or 3PP, the differential is not as large as it is for the 3PP for negative messages (Eveland & McLeod, 1999). However, future research could help to identify the conditions that lead positive messages to produce either a 3PP or a 1PP. For example, we might expect that simple prosocial messages (e.g., hand-washing) may lead to a 3PP (i.e., "I do that already"), whereas

more complex messages (e.g., vaccinations) might lead to a 1PP (i.e., “I can understand why that is important”). We might also expect messages correcting bad behavior (e.g., anti-violence messages) to be associated with 3PPs (i.e., “I don’t have that problem”), while messages promoting altruistic behaviors (e.g., giving to charity) to fit the 1PP pattern (i.e., “I am a good person”). In addition, as Golan and Day (2008) note, more research is needed on 3PP and 1PP for pro-social messages and their behavioral consequences.

### Perception moderators.

The roughly 200 studies related to the 3PP have identified a large number of moderating factors that can influence the size of the 3PP including content and usage factors, audience demographic, knowledge, and predispositional factors, and geographic factors.

### Content factors.

When assessing the perceived effects of content on self and others, it seems rather obvious that the type of content would make a difference. What is somewhat surprising is that the 3PP has been found for so many different types of content. The single most important dimension across these studies seems to be whether the content is seen as having positive or negative consequences (often referred to as the social desirability). As noted above, content that is perceived as being harmful tends to produce a 3PP, while content perceived as positive has less consistent effects. Beyond the positive/negative distinction in social desirability, the degree of negative or positivity should also make a difference. For example, Zhong (2009) found that the perceived social desirability of online video game content reduced the size of the 3PP.

A host of other content factors have been shown to influence 3PP. The size of 3PPs was influenced by the choice of news frames used in stories about the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal (Joslyn, 2003). Falces, Bautista, and Sierra (2011) conducted an experiment in which they manipulated the argument quality for a health campaign message. Results exhibited a 3PP pattern in the weak message condition, but a 1PP pattern in the strong message condition. Chung, Munno, and Moritz (2015) found that reader comments following an online news story reduced the 3PP, perhaps because it draws attention to the fact that others are not passive

recipients of potentially negative media messages. Political attack ads were perceived to have a greater effect when conveyed by conventional media as opposed to online media (Wei & Lo, 2007). Given the virtually infinite characteristics of any given type of content, and the variety of different types of content that have lent themselves to perceived effects research, it seems that research on content moderators has only scratched the surface of potential inquiry.

### Content usage.

The extent to which an individual uses content is also important as heavy users may downplay harmful effects on self and others (Lo, Wei, & Wu, 2010; Wei & Lo, 2013; Zhong, 2009). Schmierbach et al. (2011) found that the amount of video game playing reduces the size of the 3PP. Interestingly, heavy game players simultaneously acknowledged effects on themselves, but deny negative effects on the larger public suggesting an influence of perceived exposure judgments. Frequency of game playing was associated with greater perception of positive effects, but lower perceptions of negative effects.

### Demographic factors.

There have been several studies that have examined gender differences in effects perceptions—both differences between the effects judgments of men and women and differences in terms of the gender of the effects target group. Lewis, Watson, and Tay (2007) found different effects of anti-speeding and anti-drunk driving advertisements—women felt they were more affected than others, while men exhibited the 3PP. Reid et al. (2007) observed that respondent gender was the largest factor in predicting the 3PP for the perceived effects of pornography. Men reported themselves and other men to be more positively affected, while women reported themselves and other women to be more negatively affected. Similarly, Wei, and Lo (2013) observed that girls were perceived to be more negatively affected by sexting than boys.

The age of both the respondent and of the effects target group have been important factors. Henrikson and Flora (1999) found that children exhibit a particularly strong self-serving bias, with clear 3PP for cigarette ads and 1PP for anti-smoking ads. Scharrer and Leone (2006) surveyed middle school children about perceived effects of video games



and found that the 3PP was larger for games that had more restrictive ratings and when the 3PP comparison group was younger. Eveland et al. (1999) showed that the perceived effects of violent and misogynistic rap and death metal music increased markedly when comparison groups were younger.

Parallel to findings for age, perceived effects on others decreases as the level of education of the 3PP comparison groups increases (Eveland et al., 1999; Peiser & Peter, 2000). Several studies have shown respondents' education level is associated with wider 3PPs (Tiedge et al., 1991; Willnat, 1996).

### *Knowledge.*

As moderators, knowledge and expertise moderate the 3PP in three different ways: 1) through perceptions of the knowledge of the "other" group, 2) through an individual's perception of their own knowledge/expertise, and 3) through an individual's actual knowledge/expertise relevant to the effect in question. The level of perceived expertise of the 3PP comparison group about which effects judgments are being made, reduces the level of perceived effects (Jung & Jo, 2013). Similarly, perceived effects have been found to be greater on less educated groups (Eveland et al., 1999). The interpretation of these findings is that individuals perceive that less knowledgeable, less educated others are less able to protect themselves against harmful media effects.

Research has examined both the moderating influence of both the research participant's perceived level of his/her own knowledge, as well as whether they have relevant expertise. For example, Lasorsa (1989) found that one's perceived political expertise was associated with greater TPPs regarding the effects of the cold-war-inspired TV mini-series, "Amerika," but an objective measure of political knowledge was not. While the perception that one is relatively knowledgeable would naturally be linked to the ego-defensive nature of TPPs, the significance of actual expertise may be more complicated as evidenced by Huh and Langteau's (2007) survey. This survey found doctors had smaller 3PPs and consumer experts had larger 3PPs than the general public when considering the effects of DTC advertisements for prescription drugs. Rauch (2010) used qualitative interviews to explore the relative perceptions of invulnerability expressed by activists in regard to the effects of mainstream news coverage. The activists expressed the belief that their

specialized knowledge and exposure to alternative information sources enhanced their ability to resist the harmful effects of mainstream media.

### *Predispositions.*

There are many predispositions that potentially moderate 3PPs. For example, Mutz (1989) found that the perceived importance of the issue was associated with a wider 3PP gap. Lo et al. (2015) found that both perceived issue importance and cognitive elaboration reduced the size of the 3PP for the impact of news coverage in spreading fear about imported American beef in Taiwan. Zhao and Cai (2008) observed that a positive self-image was linked to wider 3PPs for Internet pornography. Political ideology is one of the most commonly examined predispositions. Banning (2006) found larger 3PP for Republicans than Democrats for effects of election news coverage. Winslow and Napier (2012) extended the 3PP logic to examine the perceived effects of same-sex marriage legalization. While there was a general tendency to see other people's attitudes about marriage and sexuality as being more affected than one's own, the differential was greatest among right-wing authoritarians.

### *Geographic factors.*

Comparative studies have shown some differences in perceived effects. For example, Hong (2015) compared 3PP for violent video games between respondents in the United States and South Korea, finding evidence of the 3PP in both countries, but the gap was larger in the United States. Using a unique approach to studying effects perceptions, Muller's (2013) content analysis revealed that U.S. and German newspaper coverage of elections fits the 3PP pattern. German stories portrayed U.S. media as having a greater impact on elections than German media, and vice versa for U.S. media.

### *Consequences of 3PP (3PE).*

While the 3PP is an interesting robust perceptual phenomenon, its significance is somewhat negligible all by itself. What makes it important is the fact that it seems to be related to various consequential opinions such as support for policies to restrict content. Though research on the consequences of the 3PP has not been as common (nor as consistent) as research on the perception itself (Boyle, Schmierbach,



& McLeod, 2013), there is consensus among researchers that it is this “influence of this perceived influence” that makes 3PP an important area of inquiry. Moreover, while research has demonstrated linkages between effects perceptions and various consequences, there are still questions about whether the consequences are the result of the 3PP gap (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997) or of the more simple size of perceived effects on others (Salwen, 1998; Gunther & Storey, 2003).

### *Censorship.*

The most commonly observed outcome variable of the 3PP is support for censorship of potentially harmful media content (Boyle, Schmierbach, & McLeod, 2013). The 3PP has been linked to the support of the censorship of pornography (Gunther, 1995; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996; Zhao & Cai, 2008), sex and violence in TV programming (Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996), ads promoting gambling (Youn, Faber, & Shah, 2000), violent video games (Hong, 2015), and rap and death metal music (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997).

Other studies have sought to refine the relationship between the 3PP and censorship in various ways. In examining the perceived effects gap for TV violence, Hoffner et al. (1999) differentiated between effects on scary world perceptions and on aggression. Only the latter was related to support for the censorship of TV violence. Chia, Lu, and McLeod's (2004) study of the relationship between 3PP and censorship in the context of the Taiwanese government's efforts to suppress the distribution of a controversial sex scandal video was driven more by the desire to punish the offending distributor rather than to protect the public from exposure. Sun, Shen, and Pan (2008) showed that the 3PP was linked to a desire to restrict negative content, while a 1PP differential was associated with the desire to amplify positive messages. McLeod, Eveland, and Nathanson (1997) propose that a paternalistic orientation leads those who perceive others to be more affected to advocate censorship of the problematic content. Those who serve as censors willingly expose themselves to potentially harmful content in order to make decisions that would protect others. Unless they are inherently masochistic, censors must then believe that they are to some degree immune to the content effects that would harm others.

Some studies have failed to find a linkage between the 3PP and support for censorship. For example, Ho et al.'s

(2012) study of attitudes toward movies with homosexual characters in Singapore failed to find a link between 3PP and support for censorship. Paradise and Sullivan (2012) failed to find a relationship between perceived negative effects of Facebook and support for greater regulation.

### *Other content restrictions.*

Several studies have extended the logic used to connect the 3PP to censorship to show that it predicts other forms of content restrictions and sanctions. Leung and Lo's (2015) survey in Hong Kong revealed significant relationships between the 3PP for online pro-drug use messages (the gap for pro-social, anti-drug messages was unrelated to support for rectifying measures) and three forms of policy options: restrictive, corrective and counter-promotional measures. Wei et al.'s (2015) analysis of survey data regarding reactions to Taiwanese coverage of the Fukushima nuclear incident showed that the 3PP was related to behavioral intentions to support self-protection, corrective actions, and public education. Gunther's (1991) study of the perceived effects of a defamatory news story failed to find a linkage to support for punitive damages against the newspaper.

Several studies have looked at the implications of 3PPs in the context of political elections. Some of these studies reveal linkages between 3PPs and support for election-related content policies including election news coverage restrictions (Salwen, 1998), poll-reporting restrictions (Wei, Chia, & Lo, 2011), and election night projections restrictions (Price & Stroud, 2006). Wei and Lo (2007) found a link to restrictions on political attack ads, but only for perceived effects on others and not the 3PP.

### *Willingness to speak out.*

Several studies have demonstrated that the 3PP can affect willingness to speak out. Mutz (1989) found that the 3PP was associated with greater willingness to join discussions and sign petitions on the issue of divestment in apartheid South Africa. Similarly, Willnat (1996) corroborated the linkage between the 3PP and willingness to speak out on a topic, though the effect was mediated through the 3PP's relationship to the public opinion climate and moderated by perceptions of issue importance. Wei, Chia, and Lo (2011) linked 3PP to willingness to engage in campaign discussions.

### *Voting.*

Cohen and Tsfati (2009) found that voting behaviors were influenced by perceptions of news coverage influence on others' voting behaviors. Similarly, Golan, Banning, and Lundy (2008) uncovered that 3PP regarding the effects of political advertising motivated respondents to vote in order to compensate for others' gullibility.

### *Self-protective behaviors.*

Tewksbury, Moy, and Weis (2004) examined 3PP consequences in the context of the Y2K computer bug that some prognosticators thought would adversely affect computers on January 1, 2000. Respondents were motivated to take protective actions like buying extra food, water and gasoline out of concern that other people would panic due to media coverage of the Y2K bug, thus creating temporary shortages. Other studies showed that the 3PP may discourage protective actions. The 3PP was associated with lower behavioral intentions to take protective actions regarding the spread of disease (Liu & Lo, 2014), which may in part be a function of optimistic bias and in part a function of the fact people are more motivated to engage in protective health behaviors out of concern for their own health as opposed to protecting the health of the community at large. In another study, parents who thought their children were less affected than other people's children were less likely to engage in parental monitoring of their children's exposure to potentially harmful media (Tsfati, Ribak, & Cohen, 2005).

### *Body image behaviors.*

Chia's (2007) survey of college women in Singapore examined the impact of perceived effects of the thinness norms perpetrated by advertising. Respondents who reported strong effects on self and others were more likely to engage in weight-loss efforts, while those who exhibited the largest 3PPs were less likely to do so.

### *Future directions for 3PP research.*

Researchers have identified numerous media content contexts in which 3PPs can be observed. While some studies have looked at different content contexts within the same study, there have been few attempts to specify differences in

perceived effects across different types of content and across studies. For what types of media and what types of content do people have the most concern about harmful effects? Under what content context do 3PPs seem to be largest? Are there differences in the predictors of 3PPs for different media? When it comes to pro-social media, given the mixed nature of findings to date, researchers could probably go further in specifying conditions under which we see 3PP and 1PP patterns.

Though Price and Tewksbury (1996) conclude that the 3PP is not a methodological artifact of factors like question proximity and ordering, some researchers have suggested that there are some methodological limitations of the 3PP. Banning (2001) found that 3PP phenomena are less prominent in the real world than when measured in surveys and controlled experiments. Moreover, one meta-analysis (Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000) found the 3PP was reduced in non-student and random samples. These studies point to the need for more research to investigate the nature of the relationship between 3PP research findings and the techniques used to find them.

Some 3PP research has gone beyond general questions about the amount of harmful or beneficial impacts that communication has on self and others to look at more specific assessments of the nature of effects. For example, when Salwen and Dupagne (1999) differentiated between general effects and immorality effects, they observed that different types of perceived effects linked to support for content restrictions from one content context to another. Pronin, Berger, and Molouki (2007) examined a variant of the 3PP by examining estimations of self and others' susceptibility to social influences that induce different types of conformity (e.g., political views and consumer purchases). Given that communication researchers have studied many different types of communication effects, it is somewhat surprising that so few studies have gone beyond the general questions of effects to look at more specific types of effects.

Above we noted many different explanations that scholars have proposed to account for the 3PP. While some researchers have begun to sort these explanations out, more work is needed. Most of the efforts so far have sought to empirically measure factors related to different explanations (e.g., see Eveland et al., 1999, who measured perceived social distance and perceived likelihood of exposure). Other researchers may want to follow the example of Rauch (2010) to do more qualitative, in-depth interviews to more deeply

explore how people derive their judgments about media effects.

Researchers have been interested in the extent to which knowledge and expertise influence 3PP phenomenon. But at best, the role of expertise remains unclear as important questions remain. Does expertise increase or shrink the 3PP? Does any observed difference in the 3PP result from differences in perceived effects on self or on others? Given that the nature of expertise varies markedly from one effects context to the next, we have only scratched the surface with regard to its relationship to the 3PP phenomenon.

Researchers should continue to seek out new domains of 3PP consequences beyond the commonly used support for censorship and willingness to speak out. Moreover, this research on 3PP consequences should follow the advice of Boyle, Schmierbach, and McLeod (2013) and employ each of the four models they identify to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the perception antecedents of 3PE consequences. It is possible that different perceptual components link to different types of consequences, which begs for more systematic explorations.

As noted above, there is some disagreement in the literature as to whether the 3PP is the result of an overestimation of effects on others or an under-estimation of effects on oneself. But the generally low levels of perceived media effects on ourselves that have been observed across media content contexts is a broad indication that people are relatively unconcerned about such effects. This unwillingness to admit the effects on oneself may cause individuals to let down their guards making them more vulnerable to media effects. It may lead individuals to over-saturating themselves with screen time, exposing themselves to harmful messages (such as violent movies and video games), and even underestimating the vast amount of time they spend with media.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have provided a conceptual model that links the various areas of media perceptions research (see [Figure 1](#)). This model separates bodies of research into those that examine media perceptions (i.e., trust/credibility perceptions and the HMP) and those that focus on perceptions of media effects (i.e., theories of Presumed Influence such as the PPI and 3PP). Each of these areas focuses on either the perception itself, the consequences of the perception, or both.

In this model, we can see that these areas are not isolated, but are very much interrelated. Perceptions of credibility/trust are related to perceptions of media bias. In turn, both sets of judgments may lead to the development of media effects perceptions. For example, the HMP is linked to the perceived effects of such bias (e.g., the PPI). Moreover, these media perceptions may involve common perceptual processes (e.g., assimilation and contrast, and self-serving biases).

It is also hoped that this model will help clarify and unify related terminology such that it will be used in a more precise way in the future. For example, since Davison (1983) originally coined the term, “Third-person Effect,” researchers have used it to cover both the perception gap and its consequences. But the literature does not treat the perceptual gap as an effect at all. To be sure, the gap is an outcome of the aforementioned psychological processes, but research uses it as an antecedent rather than as an outcome (often assuming but not testing a causal relationship to its consequences). For clarity’s sake, it is useful to refer to the gap as the “third-person perception” and its related attitudinal and behavioral consequences (e.g., support for censorship) as “third-person effects.” A related problem is that 3PEs often get referred to as the “behavioral component” of the 3PP, which is often a misnomer as many of the most common 3PE measures (e.g., support for censorship) are not behaviors at all, but attitudes (i.e., attitudes toward the acceptability of censorship). These labels can be extended to other areas of perception research to distinguish perception and consequences (e.g., HMP and HME). That said, it is probably also important for future research to investigate causal linkages between the perceptions and the so-called effects.

This model also identifies some areas of media perception research that have not been studied systematically. For instance, there are many media perceptions that are currently represented in the model by the term “Other Content Perceptions.” In 3PP research, researchers call on respondents to employ perceptions of entertainment media (e.g., perceptions of sex and violence in content) that are implicitly used to generate effects perceptions. These types of media perceptions and enumerable other types of media perceptions could be examined more explicitly and linked to their potential consequences.

Similarly, perception research for news media could be expanded beyond trust, credibility, and bias. For example, news media perception research could engage in more



detailed explorations of public perceptions of normative expectations for the press (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990), as well as perceptions of how well news media performance lives up to those expectations. Perceptions of news media ethics might constitute another area for systematic perception research. In each of these areas, media perceptions could be linked to their potential consequences (effects). Media perception research could also do more to include Uses and Gratifications research (both for news and for entertainment media). After all, there is copious research looking at how people perceive media as meeting different gratifications sought (Rubin, 2009). Choices about media use, for example, could be conceptualized as an outcome of uses and gratifications perceptions, which are also interrelated to perceptions of trust/credibility and bias (Tsfati, 2014).

Because perceived media effects on others may influence individuals' behaviors, it is important to ensure that such effects are not perceived simply because researchers asked respondents to indicate whether media have effects on the audience. In other words, when unprompted, do people see media messages and assume they influence others? The Persuasive Press Inference provides support for the premise that individuals do believe media affect others, even when they are not directly asked by researchers. PPI studies have demonstrated that when shown news messages with different valences, estimates of public opinion vary along with the perceived valence of the news content — especially when individuals believe others have been exposed to those messages. These findings are important in establishing that individuals believe that the media content that other people are exposed to can influence what those others are thinking and doing. More research on the PPI is needed to help establish that when individuals are not research respondents, they truly do perceive media as affecting others.

There is also work to be done to differentiate perceived media influence from perceived media effects. This is primarily an issue of measurement, with some research on 3PE and PPI probing a general sense of perceived media influence (e.g., To what extent would this media content influence others?), and other research using items that directly link perceived media influence to its perceived effects (e.g., To what extent would this media content influence others to think violent thoughts?). The former method leaves open the question of what sorts of effects might emerge from perceived media influence. The latter method better captures the specific perceived effects of media content, but does so at the

expense of possibly alerting the respondent to a media effect they may not have considered on their own. Alternatively, some researchers measure both perceived media influence (e.g., How much are others influenced by cigarette ads?) and perceptions of what others are doing or thinking (e.g., What percentage of the public smokes?), then look at the relationship between the two items. In other words, the researchers are trying to gauge whether the respondent believes that more people are smoking due to the influence of cigarette ads. This tactic invites questions of causality, as perceptions of what others are doing or thinking can be impacted by many other factors beyond perceived media influence. While there are pros and cons to each measurement strategy, future research should address the implications of the varying operationalizations.

In attempting to tie together research findings regarding media perceptions and perception effects, a major obstacle is parsing the different levels at which study subjects are asked to evaluate the media. For example, studies of news media perceptions may ask about individual news stories or programs, specific journalists or media personalities, different media organizations or media types, or about the press as a monolith. Different factors can be at play in shaping the perceptions of each, and the consequences of those perceptions may vary as well. Investigating the antecedents and consequences related to different levels of media perceptions is certainly an area ripe for further exploration. Additionally, when researchers ask participants to discuss their perceptions of media (particularly broad classes, such as the press, the mainstream media, the Internet, television, and newspapers), a number of factors come into play to shape what each respondent considers to be part of that class. That is, the object about which respondents are providing opinions may vary from one respondent to the next, perhaps in systematic ways, even though each is asked the same question. Studies would do well to include more specific question wording to help ensure respondents are providing answers about what the researchers are interested in, or to ask follow-up questions to understand how respondents interpret terms about which they are queried.

The vast majority of research concerning media perceptions has involved participants providing self-reports through survey questionnaires. Other techniques such as neurology, physiology, and coding facial expressions could be helpful in uncovering processes at play that self-reports may not



capture. Indeed, physiological research has shown people pay more attention to bad news (Grabe & Kamhawi, 2006), or negative news (Zillmann et al., 2004). Might we expect similar findings with respect to counterattitudinal news or with news perceived as hostile?

A final angle that offers tremendous potential for theoretical growth and future research follows the directive from Blumler, McLeod, and Rosengren (1992) that comparative research offers a vast new frontier for communication research. And while this observation holds generally across the various areas of mass communication, it is particularly true for media perceptions research. Given that media systems and mass-mediated messages differ markedly from one system to the next, it is reasonable to assume that we might observe important differences in media perception phenomena from one country to the next. Moreover, there are numerous cultural factors that differentiate the individuals doing the perceiving from one culture to the next that might also give rise to differences in media perceptions. Esser and Hanitzsch (2012) argue that the field of mass communication has exhibited “remarkable progress” in the two decades since Blumler et al.’s (1992) call for comparative research. In the introduction of their edited volume, in summarizing developments in various areas of comparative communication research, they note, “In more and more subfields of the communication discipline, comparative research is moving from description to explanation, from simplification to theoretical sophistication, from accidental choice of cases to their systematic selection, and from often anecdotal evidence to methodological rigor. These advancements clearly speak to the rich potential of the comparative approach to inaugurating new lines in communication research.” (p. 3) Despite this optimistic outlook on the field of communication, re-

search in the area of media perceptions is not there yet. A majority of the existing research on media perceptions and perceived media effects has been conducted by American researchers. And though there have been many studies conducted elsewhere, in Europe and Asia in particular, there has been virtually no comparative research that has sought to identify differences in media perceptions research between different social systems, much less research that has examined factors that might account for such differences. Moreover, the studies we have reviewed have shown remarkable consistency from one national context to another. For research in this area to move forward, it is time for researchers to examine frameworks for comparative research, such as that provided by Esser and Hanitzsch (2012), and begin the process of bringing the various strands of media perception research up to speed as far as comparative understandings.

In summary, the research in the areas that we have covered in this review has been plentiful, indicating that researchers find these areas important. The growing scope of international research on media perceptions is encouraging, but must adopt more comparative approaches in order to broaden our understanding of how different cultural orientations and varying political, economic, and media systems shape perceptions of media and media effects, and the effects such perceptions have. Given all the research that has been done to date, it is important to note that, rather than slowing down, the rate of research continues to grow (Table 1) and our theoretical understanding of these phenomena continues to expand. In this review, we not only integrate these areas into a conceptual model (Figure 1) according to their parallels and relationships to each other, but we also suggest numerous directions where future research would be fruitful.

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